NEW
NICK CARTER
WEEKLY

Issued Weekly. By subscription $2.50 per year. Entered as Second-class Matter at the N. Y. Post Office, by STREET & SMITH, *79-89 Seventh Ave., N. Y.*

No. 489 NEW YORK, MAY 12, 1906. **Price. Five Cents**

NICK CARTER'S FOXY ADVERSARY

OR THE LURES OF THE BIRD OF PARADISE

BY THE AUTHOR OF "NICK CARTER"

"I mean," said Nick Carter as he grasped her wrist, "that the farce is at an end. Your race is run, Mirabird Thurber, Bird of Paradise!"

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NICK CARTER'S FOXY ADVERSARY;

OR,

THE LURES OF THE BIRD OF PARADISE.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

FOUND IN THE RIVER.

"What do you think, Nick? The merchants of this berg have hung up a jim-dandy of a purse. Fifty thousand dollars offered for the arrest and conviction of the Bird of Paradise."

The great detective was in his den, reading one of the morning papers, when Chick burst in with the foregoing announcement.

"There is a chance for somebody," replied Nick Carter quietly.

"There is a chance for us," said Chick eagerly; "for you will come in, won't you?"

"I am already in."

"You are, eh? Since when?"

Nick looked at his watch. "Since eight o'clock. You went out at seven. Frank Baxter, the chairman of the Merchants' Committee, phoned me half an hour afterward. So I am in the case, and the fee is not a contingent one, either."

"Does that mean if you don't make the arrest you still get the reward?"

"It means that I have nothing to do with the advertised purse."

Chick's face fell. A glance at his chief's smiling countenance caused it to lighten. "What is your fee?" he asked.

"Just fifty thousand dollars."

"Whew! And you cop the simoleons, catch or no catch?"

"That's the size of it. But," Nick added, "I shall not claim the fee unless I cage the Bird."

More would have been said, but just at that moment Joseph, the valet, appeared, and said that an elderly man, in great distress of mind, was at the door, and wished to see Mr. Carter on very important business.

"Conduct him to the reception-room," said Nick. Then to Chick: "Wait here for my return. I want to go into this Bird of Paradise affair with you."

Entering the reception-room, the detective saw a thin,

ungainly, stoop-shouldered man of about seventy. His hair and beard were as white as snow. He was shaking as if with palsy, and there was anxiety and dread in the mild gray eyes which he turned on the master of the house.

"The inspector sent me here," he explained, in a cracked, trembling treble, as he arose. "I am in deep trouble. My only daughter has disappeared, and under circumstances that make me fear that she is no longer alive. If she is alive, I desire to know where she is, in order that I may go to her. If she is dead——" he paused, passing a shaking hand over his brow, and then falteringly concluded the sentence: "I want to know how she died, and I want to give her a decent burial."

Nick, with an expression of sympathy, took a seat near the window. The old man sat down again in the chair from which he had arisen, and waited for the detective to speak.

"What is your name?" was the first question.

"Mylon Thurber."

"Your residence?"

"Syracuse."

"Farmer?"

"Yes."

"Now I am ready to hear your story."

Mylon Thurber cleared his throat, and, controlling his agitation the best he could, told the following: "I have been a widower for ten years. My only child is Mirabird." Nick blinked his eyes. "A queer name, Mr. Carter. Her mother got it out of a book. But I have never called her that. She has always been 'Bird' to me.

"She is now twenty years of age, slight in figure, as beautiful as an angel, and as good. Three years ago she came to this city to learn stenography and typewriting. I had met with reverses, and she insisted upon making an attempt to earn her own living. She is a brave girl, and"—the tears came to his eyes—"she had a hard struggle before she was able to earn a dollar of her own. I came down once to see her—that was when she was in the office of Baxter & Co., the wholesale druggists, and found her contented, but greatly changed in manner. She was as beautiful as ever, but her guilelessness had gone. Sometimes, when she talked, she was satirical and bitter. 'I have gone through a great deal since I left home,' she explained, when I sorrowfully commented on her altered views, 'and am no longer the innocent, unsophisticated girl who left you in Syracuse a year and a half ago. But I have at last found myself, and hereafter it is the best of everything for you and me.'

"Since then, up to a month ago, Mr. Carter, she has sent me sums of money ranging from fifty to one thousand dollars. The last remittance was for the larger amount. Her salary had been increased, she wrote, and she had also, through tips given her by her employer, speculated successfully in stocks. Two weeks ago I wrote to her that I was about to start on a visit to my old home in Maine, and asked her to accompany me. No answer to that letter was received. I waited a few days and wrote a second letter. Again no answer. Now I began to fear that she was seriously ill. Yesterday I came to New York."

Nick, who had been listening with a serious face, here put in a word: "Has she been working for Baxter & Co all these years?"

"Yes."

"Go on."

"Her letters had been addressed for over a year from a number on East Seventy-fourth Street. I went there yesterday afternoon, to learn, greatly to my surprise, that she had not occupied rooms there for six months. One of the servants, however, said she could easily find the new address for me. I was asked to wait while the girl went out to get the address. An hour went by, and the servant returned with the information that Bird was living in a flat in Harlem, a few blocks from the river. With the address in my pocket, I left the house, boarded a car, and in a short time reached my destination."

Mylon Thurber tried to go on, but choked over the words. Nick Carter took compassion on the sorely stricken man.

"I have read the morning papers," he said gently, "and I think I can furnish the ending to your story. You went to the flat, to make the sorrowful discovery that your daughter had left the place during the night, between twelve and one o'clock, under circumstances of the most distressful character."

"Yes—yes!" huskily assented the old man.

"You learned that while suffering from feverish delirium she escaped from her nurse, and has not since been heard from."

Thurber nodded his head. Tears were in his eyes and his lips were trembling.

"In her night-robes and beaded slippers, with only the addition of a black skirt hastily put on, she slipped through the little gabled window on the third story, reached the roof, and from there, so it is supposed, dropped eight feet to the top of the porch, and from the porch dropped ten feet to the ground."

"The feat was little short of superhuman. That she was not killed is past understanding," murmured the father.

After a long pause, during which he endeavored to pull himself together, Thurber continued: "An investigation by the police was made yesterday. All the way around the roof of the house, down to the roof of the porch, which projects some eight feet beyond and below the eaves, the poor girl crawled in her nightclothes. On the eaves the imprint of her fingers, where she clutched

the roof as she made the perilous venture, are plainly discernible. The whole affair would have been utterly impossible had Bird been possessed of her reason."

"Did you interview the nurse?" asked Nick.

"Yes. She is prostrated over the terrible affair. She said that Bird had been ill for several days, and that early in the evening she became delirious. She also said that she took every reasonable precaution to prevent Bird from escaping from the house unseen. She slept in the room with my daughter, and night before last locked the door and placed the key under her own pillow. The thought that escape through the little bedroom window, three stories above the ground, was possible, was never for a moment entertained. Yesterday morning, about one o'clock the nurse awoke from an hour's nap, to find that her patient had disappeared. The half-opened window told the awful story."

"The police were at work yesterday on the case, I suppose?" said Nick.

"Yes; and not the slightest trace of my daughter has been discovered. Some of the officers, Mr. Carter"—there was a pitiful quaver in the old man's voice—"believe that she wandered to the river shore and ended her life in the water. To-day both the Harlem and East rivers are being dragged."

"We shall know the result before long," said the detective. "Perhaps a report has already been made." Nick arose, took one step toward the phone, then stopped.

"One question, Mr. Thurber. You have said your daughter is slight in figure. Now, as to complexion and color of hair?"

"She was a blonde, with a fair complexion. Her cheeks, when I last saw her, were thin. Her mouth was small and her eyes were hazel, I think."

"You are not sure, then?"

"No. I can only say that they were bright, laughing eyes."

Nick went to the phone and called police headquarters.

At the conclusion of his talk with the inspector he turned to Mylon Thurber, with a grave face. "The body has been found," he said.

The old man uttered a hoarse cry, clutched at his throat, and then fell from his chair, and lay still.

Nick Carter bent over the body, and held the limp hands until they were cold in his grasp.

"Dead!" he said, in an awed whisper.

CHAPTER II.

CREDITED TO THE BIRD.

Back to the den went the great detective. Chick was at the desk, writing a letter. Patsy, who had just come in, was lighting a cigarette.

"Boys," said Nick, "I had fixed this hour for a consultation over the affair of the Bird of Paradise. The talk will have to be deferred. There is a dead man in the reception-room. Apoplexy carried him off after he had told me a very sad story. Patsy, hike to the coroner's office, and see that the body is removed to the morgue. Chick, go to Frank Baxter, and find out when Miss Mirabird Thurber left his employ, what were the reasons for leaving her position in his office, if she did leave it, and also what opinion he holds regarding her character and attainments. This evening we will get together, compare notes, and lay out a program."

No questions were asked, and the orders were obeyed promptly.

Nick waited until the arrival of the coroner, and then started for Harlem. After several hours spent in the vicinity of the water, he went to the morgue and looked at the body of the young woman found in the river, listened to what the coroner had to say, and then remarked: "Fate was kind to the old man. Better for him to have died as he did than to have lived to learn what must have broken his heart."

"And better for the daughter that she should have died as she did than to have lived and suffered what the law had in store for her," replied the coroner.

Nick looked from the body of Mylon Thurber to the body of the drowned girl, and a curious expression stole into his face.

"This is a queer world," was all he said in response.

The detective did not remain for the inquest. He had learned all he wished, and with a thoughtful countenance left for his residence.

That evening Chick and Patsy sat before him in the den.

Chick, asked for his report, said: "I found Baxter, the head of the firm of Baxter & Co., at his office, on Sixth Avenue. He frowned when I solicited information concerning Mirabird Thurber. 'Has she got into a scrape?' he asked. I told him I did not know, that you had sent me, and that you had good reason for wanting the infy. 'Well,' said he, 'the girl was a bad actor. She left my employ nearly a year ago. I discharged her. She understood typewriting and stenography, all right, but she was dishonest. She stole things from the office, and she used points in my private correspondence to fill her purse. I caught her at last, and I sent her packing in a hurry. I would have turned her over to the police if she hadn't cut up so. She said she had an old father, who looked upon her as an angel without wings. If she were to be sent to jail, the knowledge of her position would kill the old man. I weakly consented to let her off. I haven't seen her since. Don't know where she is, or what she did after she left me. But she was a bad one. And pretty as a picture, too.'"

"I expected just the sort of information you have brought, Chick," said his chief. "And now we will con-

sider the Bird of Paradise affair. The police of this city, the inspector's detectives as well, now probably look upon the matter as ended. Let them think so. To my mind, it is not ended. There are many chapters yet to be written. The chief and his men are, I make no doubt, satisfied that the body of the young woman at the morgue is the body of the young woman who for a year past has either herself stolen, or has caused to be stolen, over a million dollars' worth of goods from the merchants of this city."

Chick and Patsy exhibited profound astonishment.

"All will become clear as I proceed," said Nick, with a smile. "First, I will tell you the story which Mylon Thurber told me."

The story told, the great detective continued: "Before the old man had finished I had made up my mind that his daughter, Mirabird, was the Bird of Paradise. The name itself was significant, and the description fitted the princess of thieves to a dot. Strange, isn't it, that within a space of three years a young woman at the threshold of life should have become the most dangerous criminal operator in New York? She must have been born with a crook in her brain. Before she came to this city she must have possessed latent qualities of evil, the existence of which were never dreamed of by her doting father."

"And now she is dead," said Patsy; but the tone lacked conviction.

Chick said nothing, but with the suspicion of a smile waited for Nick to proceed.

"Dead for a time to the police," returned the great detective. "But not dead to me. A cunning fraud has been perpetrated and a new program has been mapped out. Not a program of reform, for women of the stripe of the Bird of Paradise seldom reform. She has, during the past year, cut a wide swath in one direction. Unless I greatly mistake her character and Satanic abilities, she will attempt, in a new environment and under new conditions, to further plunder the good people of this metropolis. You both know what she has already done. By shoplifting, as a starter, by forged orders, by most daring impersonations of society leaders, by a series of frauds as ingenious as they were bold, she has stolen nearly half a million of dollars in goods and money, and has given the business men of New York such a scare that the offer of a reward of fifty thousand dollars was made without a dissenting voice."

"They are feeling better now," remarked Patsy.

"Yes; and in their fancied security lies the Bird's chance—and mine. She is believed to be dead. If I had not seen and talked with Mylon Thurber I might be with them in the category of the fooled. But, armed with certain information, I went to the morgue, and, looking upon the dead face of the drowned woman, knew that the corpse was not that of the Bird of Paradise.

"Mirabird Thurber was a blonde. Nature made her so. The drowned woman was a blonde, but the color of hair was due to the application of peroxide of hydrogen, chlorine, or some other chemical preparation. A careful scrutiny of the hair roots showed that the natural color was dark-brown. The condition of the face, to my mind, indicated that a fraud had been worked. The nose was smashed in, and there were other disfigurements. Otherwise the body was in perfect condition. There is a possibility that a murder was committed, but there is no evidence to justify a verdict of that kind. The body was found lodged between two water-logged timbers, and the disfigurement might easily have been caused by the rough movements of these heavy chunks of wood. The coroner's jury will find no motive for murder, while there will be plenty of evidence to show that it was a case of suicide, committed under temporary aberration of mind. The body was clad in the scanty clothing that was worn by Mirabird Thurber when she made her sensational flit from the flat in Harlem. The rings on the dead woman's fingers were hers. A necklace was identified by a Fifth Avenue jeweler as his property. It had been stolen from his establishment. The proprietor of the flat where Mirabird Thurber resided told the coroner that this necklace had been worn in life by her tenant. All this, and other evidence, will, beyond doubt, prove to the satisfaction of the jury and the police that the Bird of Paradise is no longer among the living."

"How was the fraud worked, Nick? Have you figured it out?" asked Chick.

"I have figured out how it might have been worked. The Bird, through information furnished by her spies—and she must have an army of them—saw that she was at the end of her rope. She probably knew that the merchants had organized to take desperate action. The store lead had been worked out. But there were others. There was but one thing to be done. She must disappear, and the world must look upon her as dead."

"The nurse must have been privy to the scheme of deception," suggested Chick.

Nick nodded his head. "It looks that way," he replied, "and that nurse ought to make an interesting subject for our consideration. The Bird's illness was a sham. She went out of the window and got to the ground, but without risk of injury. A confederate was outside, and she was speedily taken care of. I don't think she went very far after leaving the flat. The dead body was already in the river. The clothing had been duplicated and the jewelry affixed before the plant was made. Whose body was it? We must find out if we can. We must also discover, if possible, where the Bird went when she slipped from the house in Harlem. And we must pay our best respects to the nurse."

After a long discussion over ways and means, the campaign was arranged. Before night Nick Carter had before him the verdict and testimony in the matter of

the death of the woman whose body had been found in the river. Suicide, while temporarily insane, was the verdict. The testimony, except in one particular, was what he had looked for. An autopsy had been made, and with it came the discovery that the woman had been dead not more than twelve hours when the body was found, and that she had been afflicted with typhoid-pneumonia in an aggravated form. It was the opinion of the operating physician and surgeon that the woman would have died in her room if she had not, in an excess of strength caused by the fever, fled from her bed to meet death in the waters of the river.

This opinion puzzled the detective not a little, but after awhile his brow cleared. He saw that one of his theories must be abandoned.

That evening, as he was preparing to set out on a mission of investigation, he had a caller in the person of a young man who was well and favorably known to him.

The young man was Wilfred James, a stock-broker and native of the city.

He was short, stoutly built, and his face was frank and honest.

As Nick entered the reception-room, he said apologetically: "I know I am here out of business hours, Mr. Carter, but you will excuse my appearance, I hope, when you learn what I have got for you."

The detective showed no surprise and only ordinary interest. He was used to such explanations. James might be involved in some trouble—trivial, perhaps, but which had been magnified into importance.

"I own a half-interest in a shoe store and that gives me standing as a merchant, though I am not an active participant in the business management," the young man said, as they seated themselves. "I don't know why they should have selected me, but I was put on the committee which has offered a reward of fifty thousand dollars for the arrest and conviction of the Bird of Paradise. So, you see, I come here in an official capacity to give information to the man who has been retained to look into the Bird's case."

Nick pricked up his ears. The communication about to be made might be of importance, after all.

"You have made a discovery, then?" he said quickly.

"I have. Rather a curious discovery, too. I don't understand what it means. I know that the coroner's jury has said that that devil among women, the Bird of Paradise, is no more, but twelve good men have in the past made mistakes, and one may have been made in this instance. Now, listen to this: Night before last I did not sleep a wink. Devilish toothache, you understand. My rooms are in an apartment-house in Harlem, and, as I have since discovered, less than a block from the house in which Mirabird Thurber is supposed to have resided. No, supposed is not the word, for I'll admit that she did reside there. Well, some time after midnight—it was not one o'clock, though—while I was sitting at the front window—there was no light in the room—I saw coming along the sidewalk a tall man bearing in his arms a woman clad in her nightclothes. I watched and saw the man and his burden disappear down the basement steps of a building two doors below. My first impression was that the woman had been rescued from a burning building, but though I craned my head out of the window I could neither see flames nor smell smoke. I am not naturally of a curious disposition, but I determined to ascertain when morning came what the strange sight I had witnessed meant.

"Half an hour passed, and I was still sitting by the window when the same tall man I had seen before passed my window and, crossing the street, proceeded toward the river. He carried a large bundle in his arms. Shortly afterward I crept into bed and did not get up again until after daylight.

"After breakfast I investigated the basement which the tall man must have entered. The landlady of the house permitted me to do so after I had told her what I had seen from my window. 'You will find nothing there,' she said, 'for the basement has been vacant for months.' Nor did I find anything. It was bare of furniture and articles of any kind and the floor did not show a speck of dust, so I met with no luck in looking for footprints."

"That was odd, the floor being free from dust," remarked Nick.

"So I thought, and Miss Peyton"—young James blushed—"to whom I afterward mentioned the circumstance, said this was proof positive that some one had been there and had either swept or wiped off the floor to destroy any clue which the footprints might have left. She is a very bright girl, is Miss Peyton, and she has promised to make certain inquiries that may assist in clearing up the mystery of the night's doings."

"Where does this young woman reside?" asked Nick.

"In the next block. She is—well, the fact is, Mr. Carter, we're engaged. She is the daughter and only child of the late General Peyton, of South Carolina, who was here a few years ago to float some Carolina railway bonds. I knew him well and you must have met him."

"I knew him slightly. He was a typical Southern gentleman of the old school."

"He was, indeed. His daughter Mildred was then at home. On the death of her father, two years ago, she came to New York. She has some means, but she was seized with a desire to go upon the stage. I think I have succeeded in dissuading her from doing so."

"What inquiries is she to make?" questioned Nick.

"She said she would interview the neighbors."

"Is that all you have to tell me?"

"Nearly all. I did not make a further move until

after business hours that day. When I reached my rooms late in the afternoon the *Herald* told me all about the sensational flight of Mirabird Thurber. I thought of the tall man and his human burden, and at once established a connection between the two occurrences. While I was reading a telegram came. One of my clients, living in Boston, was dying, and my presence at his bedside was urgently requested. By hurrying I could catch a night train. I hurried and did not get back from Boston until this afternoon."

"And your client? Did you find him alive?" asked Nick, with a queer expression on his face.

Wilfred James looked the picture of disgust. "Alive? I should say he was. Had not been ill. Never sent any telegram. I had been imposed upon, but by whom and for what purpose I have no idea."

"There are wheels within wheels," said Nick. "You are in the game. The Bird is already at work. I should like to clip her wings before she flies high. I was preparing to go down your way when you came in, Mr. James. I want to interview the patrolman on the beat and also learn what discoveries, if any, Miss Peyton has made."

CHAPTER III.

THE VEILED WARNING.

On the way to Harlem Nick Carter said: "The tall man you spoke of cuts a prominent figure in the case. Did you see his face?"

"Not so as to give you a working description. He kept in the shadow of the buildings and held his head down. I did observe, however, that he wore a beard."

"Was he stout, or thin?"

"Very thin."

"Neck long, or short?"

"He had a long neck."

At the door of James' residence the detective parted with the young stock-broker, after promising to return inside of an hour.

Nick wished to have a talk with the patrolman of the beat. There was an important point which must be settled, if possible, before he could proceed with a proper degree of understanding with his investigations. He had formed a theory that covered the point and he believed the patrolman would be able to support it.

The officer was soon found and quite willing to talk about a case that was the sensation of the day.

"If that nurse told the truth, Mr. Carter," said he, "and the Bird flew the coop at half-past twelve, or closely thereabout, I was then at the other end of the beat and out of sight. Of course, a girl gone bughouse couldn't possibly have timed her flit so as to have a clear field. Luck—bad luck, eh?—was with her."

"How often do you pass the house in which she resided?" questioned Nick.

"Every half-hour."

It was half an hour after the first appearance of the tall man with the body of a woman in his arms, according to Wilfred James' statement, that the same man reappeared on the sidewalk bearing a large burden. He, also, had been favored by luck, for at the time the patrolman was once more out of sight.

Nick knew that a cunning rascal, well acquainted with the locality, could easily have reached the river without discovery.

Leaving the patrolman, the detective returned to Wilfred James' residence and was soon comfortably ensconced in an easy chair in the stock-broker's best room.

"I have sent a note to Mildred—Miss Peyton—stating that you wish to see her, and that you and I will call after awhile. Well, what do you think? Is the Bird of Paradise dead, or is she alive?"

"She is alive, but don't publish the fact. Let what I am going to tell you remain a secret for the present. The detective force of this city is all right, but with the inside information now in my possession I believe I can do the work better if left alone. I don't say that secrecy will likely throw dust in the eyes of the Bird, for I have too strong an appreciation of the shrewdness and cunning of this ubiquitous she-devil to imagine for a moment that she is unaware of my suspicions regarding herself."

"But how could she know that you believe the coroner was deceived?" spoke James, in marked surprise. "She is human. She can't see through a stone wall, and she can't read your mind when out of your presence, perhaps miles away from you."

"I can't say just how she got wise, for I don't know. But that she is aware that I am onto her game is as certain as the fact that I am now in your room talking to you."

"But by what species of reasoning do you arrive at this conclusion?" said the young stock-broker, in bewilderment.

Nick Carter patted his knee softly. "By an interpretation of peculiar circumstances and by imagining probable sequences. You were sent to Boston on a wild-goose chase. There is every indication that the scheme was concocted by the Bird of Paradise. What was her object? To keep you away from the coroner's inquest. Had you attended, you would have given testimony that would, in all probability, have raised a suspicion in the minds of the jury and the police that the body was not that of the notorious female criminal for whose arrest such a large reward has been offered. When you returned from Boston the inquest was over. The Bird, I am inclined to think, looked upon you as an average citizen, and, therefore, believed that, having no perception of the importance of your discovery, you would

conclude to accept the jury's verdict as the settlement of the whole matter."

"If your reasoning is correct," said James, with a sour face, "she must have taken me for a blanked idiot."

"She was not quite so uncomplimentary as that," returned Nick, with a smile.

The stock-broker shook his head. He refused to accept the detective's theory. His self-esteem was wounded.

"The move had to be made," said Nick consolingly, "and though the Bird hoped that her conclusion regarding yourself would prove to be the correct one, she made preparations to offset failure. Later developments have shown her that you are far from being an idiot. She now knows that you are much sharper than she thought."

Wilfred James' countenance cleared. The detective was tickling his vanity, and he liked the operation.

"Can't you see what I am driving at?" continued Nick. "The Bird had you shadowed when you got off the train at Forty-second Street to-day. You were seen to enter my door. What must a shrewd criminal have inferred from that proceeding? First, that you had a suspicion of the truth, and, secondly, that I, armed with your knowledge and the other facts in my possession, would have more than a suspicion. Admitting that I have hit the bull's-eye, it follows that the Bird knows that you are now having a second talk with me."

James exhibited uneasiness. He was not a coward, but the situation in which he found himself, so out of keeping with his past way of life, had got on his nerves.

Nick Carter, watching him quietly, was gratified at the next words of the stock-broker.

"I am not used to this sort of thing," he said, "but"—with a squaring of the jaws—"I intend to see it through. If you have need of my services, Mr. Carter, you will find me ready to give them."

"Thank you. And now shall we go to Miss Peyton's residence?"

"Yes."

Five minutes later Nick and James were seated in the reception-room of the house which sheltered the young stock-broker's affianced wife.

When she came into the apartment the detective drew a deep breath. He had seen many beautiful women in the course of his life, but none more lovely than Mildred Peyton. Her stature was short and she was far from etherial. She was plump, but her figure was perfection. A decided brunette, with ravishing dark-brown eyes and a brilliant complexion, features exquisitely cut and mouth made for love and kisses, she embodied a charm that no man with senses fine or otherwise was able to resist.

When the introduction was over she said, in a rich, soft voice with a captivating drawl and the Southern disregard of the relation of the "r" to spoken words:

"I am charmed to meet you, Mr. Carter." Her languishing eyes dwelt for a moment on the detective's face. Then she went on impulsively: "I have longed for years to meet a real detective. The methods used by the gentlemen of the profession have always greatly interested me. If I were a man I think I should be an investigator of crime, Mr. Carter. But as I am only a poor woman I have concluded to be an actress."

Wilfred James, who had been smiling the smile of a fond lover, suddenly frowned. "You have forgotten your promise, Mildred," he said.

She turned to the speaker with a contrite expression. "So I had, deah." Then, as his face softened, she continued: "I will act for you, but not for the public. And now," addressing Nick, "as you are a business man, Mr. Carter, let us talk business. I am devoured with curiosity to learn more about this bugaboo of yours, this Bird of Paradise. What an odd title for a woman. Why was it given to her? Do you know?"

She seated herself in front of Nick and looked at him expectantly.

"She lived at one time in a quarter on the East Side known as Paradise Court. Her intimates called her Bird, and the police, with a sarcastic sense of the fitness of things, put on the addition to her name."

"And you think she is still alive?"

"Yes."

"Why do you think so?"

Nick told her.

Mildred Peyton studied over the matter a moment. When she spoke it was with conviction.

"I agree with you, Mr. Carter. I am certain, too, that she knows that you have seen through the fraud. Let me tell you what I learned and you will better understand. I told Wilfred that I would interview the neighbors. I did so, and I found one girl, a Miss Crites, a typewriter and stenographer, who saw a tall man follow Wilfred when he left me to find you. The man had been waiting for some time at the corner."

"That must have been the fellow who carried away the body, Mr. Carter," said James. "And, of course, he is one of the Bird's confederates."

"And his presence near this house in the rôle of spy establishes as correct the theory that the Bird knows where I am at this moment," rejoined Nick.

Mildred Peyton showed alarm. "If this be so," she said nervously, "you had better be on your guard. She is a dangerous woman, Mr. Carter."

"I am convinced that she is," replied the detective soberly. "I wonder what her new game is?" he added reflectively.

"It looks as if she meant to get you out of the way before she plays it," remarked the young stock-broker.

"Indeed it does," assented Miss Peyton earnestly.

"I am a puppet in the hands of fate," was the reply. "I must take what comes."

It was after ten o'clock when Nick left the house. Rain had fallen while he was within doors and a dense fog had succeeded the downpour. The electric lights enabled him to pursue his way easily along the sidewalk, but portions of the street were obscured. Though every sense was alert, he was in an unusually sober mood. The talk with pretty Mildred Peyton had furnished food for serious reflection. The Bird of Paradise, dead to the world, was already in action in her new sphere. That she would strike soon was probable. How?—his meditations were interrupted by the salutation of a patrolman who had emerged suddenly from a black bank of fog.

"Nasty night, Mr. Carter," he said. "Hard to do business in. I lost a trick just now. Fog gives me the 'ha, ha.'"

"What happened?" asked Nick.

"Take this, and I'll unload a little budget."

The detective was handed a sealed envelope. To his astonishment it was addressed to himself. He looked from the envelope to the patrolman, who was shaking his head.

"You're spotting something queer, eh? Queer it is. I was across the street a few minutes ago when out of the fog in the roadway rushes a young geezer with that envelope in his fist. 'Hand this to Mr. Carter,' he gasps. 'He's coming along below on the other side.' I took the envelope, and the messenger darted into the fog. Thinks I, 'There's a cat in the meal tub, or I'm a liar,' and I up and gave chase. What was the use?"—in strong disgust. "The fog played into his hands and double-banked me."

They were standing where the light was good, and Nick, opening the envelope, drew out the enclosure, and read these words:

"Castle Somewhere, Manhattanville.

"To whom it may concern, and that is you: Realizing that it is impossible to hoodwink the astute and wily Nicholas, I have concluded to be frank with you. Therefore you are assured that this note was not indicted from the hitherward side of Hades, but from a heavenly spot on the East Side far above the dead-line. Why do I write to you, my enemy? The whim of the moment induces me, let us say. You interest me, but I do not fear you." ("Oh, yes, you do, little one," thought the reader, "or you would never have written to me.") "To show you that I am utterly indifferent to your investigations I urge you to keep on. Use all your wits, spur on Chick and Patsy, and, above all, don't spare your closet of disguises. You are a slick worker, Nicholas, but, believe me, your esteemed correspondent is slicker. Must I say more, or do you prefer a kick to a hint?

"The Bird of Paradise."

CHAPTER IV.

CHICK FINDS THE NURSE.

Having read the note, Nick Carter replaced it in the envelope and put the latter into his pocketbook. "The note bears on a case of mine," he informed the patrolman. "There are some things in it that require explanation. I wish I could have seen and talked with the messenger. Did you observe him particularly?"

"No. He came toward me with a rush and head down. He was little more than a kid and he had a dirty mug. I didn't see his eyes."

"Was he slender in build?"

"Sure."

"A woman in disguise, perhaps?" looking at the patrolman shrewdly.

"Might have been." Then, after a pause: "I'll gamble that he was, for, now I think of it, his voice was more like a woman's, or that of a big kid."

As Nick walked on toward the nearest "L" station on Second Avenue he smiled more than once.

When he reached home he found Chick and Patsy awaiting him.

Each had something to report. Chick's statement was a most astonishing one, but it made clear a matter that had bothered Nick not a little.

"I followed your instructions, and went to the flat recently occupied by Mirabird Thurber. The nurse who attended the sick woman was not there. She had gone to her home in Morrisiana. I got her address and hiked over the river. Mrs. Bland, that's the nurse's name, was in, and talked a blue streak when once I had set her tongue going. I was made up as a farmer, and I told her I was the dead woman's uncle from up the river. I had read the testimony given before the coroner, but had found that some details were lacking. The nurse, who had a hard face and cold blue eyes, appeared to accept my representation as the real stuff, and cheerfully—yes, cheerfully, for she smiled as she spieled—answered every question I put to her. When I had exhausted my stock I produced a heavy sigh. Then I shook my head. 'I can't, I can't believe,' I tearfully said, as I brought out my bandanna, 'that niece Mirabird was a thief. It's monstrous to think so. The police are wrong. I'd stake my life on it.'

"'Miss Thurber,' replied the nurse, 'struck me as a woman of refinement and high principles. I was dumfounded when that testimony about the robberies came out. I believe, with you, that a mistake has been made.'

"'Well,' I said, as I took my leave, 'I am a poor man and can't do anything, but I shall always think that the poor girl was maligned.'" Chick paused and looked at Nick.

"That's not all," said the great detective. "Come to the point."

"No, Nick, that is not all. While I was talking with the nurse I was using my eyes. Mrs. Bland is very tall. She is also thin, with long arms and hands as large as those of a man. Her neck is long and her voice is harsh."

"A man!" exclaimed Patsy.

"No, not a man," replied Chick. "She's a woman, all right, but it would be no trouble for her to play the part of a man, and play it well."

Nick Carter nodded his head. "Right you are, Chick. She can play a male rôle and she has played it more than once. She is the tall man I have been trying to place, but couldn't. She carried the sick woman into that basement and afterward bore the same woman, dead, to the river."

After putting Chick and Patsy in possession of all the knowledge he had gained and the deductions he had made, the detective continued: "Circumstances alter theories, to ring a change on the old saying. When I took the case I thought that the Bird had played sick and had been taken by the tall man to the basement, and that the plant in the river had been made earlier in the night. Now, with more facts to guide me, I believe that the woman who left the flat in her nightclothes was not the Bird. This woman was really ill. The post-mortem proved that. She may have been dead when she was taken to the flat, and the nurse, as the tall man, may have done the roof-climbing act to support the story that the public and the police have swallowed as the truth. If she was not dead she was near the end of life, for the bundle which left the basement contained the body of a dead woman. My belief is that the Bird, knowing that this woman—a confederate, probably—had but a short time to live, concocted the scheme of deception that was foisted on the coroner. What promised more than anything else to make the fraud work was the sick girl's resemblance in face and figure to the Bird of Paradise. Taken altogether, this case of the Bird is a very peculiar one. I never knew the like."

Nick lighted a cigar, gave a few puffs, and went on: "We are fighting a band of women. I don't believe there is a single male confederate or tool."

Chick opened his eyes in surprise. Patsy whistled softly.

"And because the Bird's band is composed exclusively of women she has hugged to her soul the flattering unction that her position is impregnable. She counts on having us occupied the greater portion of the time on false scents, and she hopes that this work of chasing shadows will last long enough for her to pull off the game, which she is at present putting into shape.

"Consider the facts. The nurse, a woman, played a man's part on two or three occasions. The messenger who handed that note to the patrolman was undoubtedly a woman. It was not the Bird, for the Bird orders, she does not execute. If I am right, and I believe I am, we have got to look out for all kinds of new tricks. We can't bank on any points gained by our experiences with male criminals, for women of crooked morals follow lines that their brothers in crime would either despise or regard as insanely desperate and dangerous. Let me illustrate: The Bird has, through her agents, given us considerable information, seemingly of value according to her way of looking at it when she is thinking for us, but really useless when digested as she knows that at some time it will be. Mildred Peyton, a very pretty, bright, and active young woman, interviews a Miss Crites, a typewriter, living near the scene of the roof-climbing and basement episodes. Miss Crites said she saw a tall man shadowing Wilfred James. Before this we had learned that a tall man had carried the sick woman to the basement. Now, this Miss Crites is either one of the Bird's band or she has been hypnotized into saying just what the Bird wanted said.

"'Keep your mind on the tall man,' says the Bird to us. Here is a clue for Nick, Chick, and Patsy. They are expected to fall all over themselves in trying to locate this important individual. Does the Bird harbor the faintest fear that we will discover that the tall man is a woman? No. The pains she has taken to bring the tall man to our notice proves to my mind that she thinks that his identity with the hard-faced nurse will never be discovered. We must be wary in approaching Miss Crites. I'll study her case after I am in bed, and be ready to talk business in the morning."

The detective arose, stretched himself, and turned to leave the den, when Patsy remarked carelessly: "I suppose my report can wait till to-morrow."

Nick Carter's fine face flushed. "Wait? no," he said emphatically. "I wonder what made me so forgetful?"

Chick tapped his head. "I know," he said. "You have got something in your noddle that persists in crowding everything else into a corner."

Nick gave his assistant a queer look. "If it gets out and you catch it, don't let it get away with you. Now, Patsy."

The young detective's report was short.

"Sent to further investigate the house with the basement, I found the occupants to be two respectable married couples and a young woman. This young woman is a typewriter, her rooms are directly over the basement, and her name is Iora Crites."

"Good!" was Nick's quick comment. "Now I see clearly. Did you learn where Miss Crites is employed?"

"Sure. She is in Bullen's office, in Wall Street."

And Nick retired with something more to think about.

CHAPTER V.

A GAME OF WITS.

In the ladies' section of a Park Row restaurant a corner with two tables had been for several months reserved for a typewriting contingent. The girls composing it, except one, came from the offices in the neighborhood. This one was employed in a Wall Street office, but for

the sake of exercise walked the fairly long distance once a day. Her name was Iora Crites, and she was of slender form and pretty, piquant features.

Shortly after the noon hour on the day following the consultation of Nick Carter and his assistants eight young women sat in their accustomed seats in the restaurant.

As there was a frequent change of waitresses the appearance at the girls' corner for order-taking of a comely, buxom Irish girl with auburn hair neither excited surprise nor occasioned comment. The girl spoke with an agreeable touch of the brogue, and was so modest and courteous, and performed her duties so deftly and expeditiously, that several of the typewriters took occasion to congratulate the proprietor over his luck in securing the services of such a capable employee.

Before a week had passed the waitress was on familiar terms with all the patrons that she served. She had imparted the information that she was a recent arrival from the old country, that Dublin was her home, and that she had worked for years in hotels and restaurants. Honoria Mullaly was her name, and she was an orphan.

One day, in the late afternoon, Miss Mullaly, out for an airing Batteryward, crossed Wall Street and came face to face with Iora Crites. The Irish girl blushed to the roots of her hair, but did not speak. She knew her place. But Miss Crites bowed, smiled, and held out her hand.

"Your afternoon out?" she asked, with a pleasant smile and without a scintilla of condescension.

"Since t'ree o'clock, ma'am," was the somewhat stiff reply.

"Where were you going?"

"Down to the Batthery. I like it betther than Cinthral Park."

Miss Crites, whose cheeks were pale, hesitated a moment and then said: "If you have no objection, I will walk with you."

For a moment, covered with confusion, Honoria did not utter a word in response. Miss Crites regarded her with an amused smile.

"Certainly, ma'am. I'll be pleased to have you throt along wet' me."

As they walked, the self-contained typewriter tried to put the bashful waitress at ease, and at last succeeded.

Arrived at the Battery they found seats, and for more than an hour remained near the water.

The Irish girl thawed out long before they started for their homes.

Asked if she liked restaurant work, Honoria vehemently replied: "I hate it, ma'am. And I'll get out of it as soon as I can put away a few hoonderd. I am afther wantin' to be a lady's-maid."

"A lady's-maid?" looking at the girl curiously. "Have you had any experience?"

"A little, ma'am. Twice in Dublin, betune times, whin I was out of emplymint at me dish-slingin' thrade, I played lady's-maid for a banker's daughther."

Further conversation was of a nature satisfactory to both. When Honoria Mullaly arose from the bench her cheeks were glowing with joy.

At eight o'clock Nick Carter, at his home, received a phone message: "Come at once. I have important news for you. Mildred Peyton."

The detective lost no time in obeying the summons. At Miss Peyton's residence he found the lovely Southern girl awaiting him with sparkling eyes and countenance all aquiver with excitement.

"When I suggested a certain move at our last conference, Mr. Carter," she began, without giving him a chance to speak, "you acted as if you had little confidence in it. I am entitled to an abject apology, for I have succeeded beyond my wildest dreams."

Nick's face lighted up. "Pray accept my apology, before you go any further. I should have known that for one of your rare accomplishments, to succeed was a matter of course."

She gave him a mock curtsy. "Thank you. Now, sit down, compose your mind, and listen to my tale of luck. I told you once that I am an actress, though I have never been on the stage. Now I am going to prove that I was not flattering myself. I have oceans of time on my hands. I am deeply interested in this Bird of Paradise affair. One morning, not long ago, I offered to give you my valuable assistance. As a gentleman you did not decline the offer, but you did not enthuse over it. Well, I went to work soon after you left me. Before your coming I had ascertained that Iora Crites—a young woman I had seen but once—was accustomed to take her midday meal at a restaurant on Park Row. I selected a make-up which I thought would pass muster, and hired myself out to the proprietor of the eating-house as a waitress. I have dined there many times, and the methods seemed to be easy. I am quick and careful in my movements, and as I was on parade I did my prettiest. I played my part so well that I succeeded in a short space of time in ingratiating myself with Iora Crites. Get ready to be struck with amazement. I am but a shade removed from bosom friendship. I am going to throw up my job—that's the word, isn't it?—at the restaurant and enter Miss Crites' service as lady's-maid. There, now, what do you think of that, Mr. Carter?"

She folded her shapely arms, puckered her lips, and cocked her pretty head.

"I think you are a marvel," was the frank comment. "You are one woman in a thousand. With your assistance the Bird will soon be in a cage. Woman against woman, that's the idea."

Mildred Peyton seemed greatly pleased with the great

detective's appreciation of her abilities. She was now in high spirits, and Nick smiled with satisfaction as he looked at her.

"I have not ended my story," she said. "What is to come is the best of all. Miss Iora Crites is preparing to leave New York. She has saved a little money and she is going to Florida for the winter. All her arrangements have been made, and she starts to-morrow."

Nick repressed a whistle. "I wasn't counting on that," was his remark. "And I can't stop her, for I am not yet ready to take action against her."

"You forget, Mr. Carter," spoke Miss Peyton, coldly and reproachfully, "that I shall accompany her."

"Forgive me for forgetting," Nick said humbly. "For the moment my mind was engrossed with the great problem at issue. Your going will, of course, be of incalculable benefit to me. I should like to accompany you."

"Why can't you?" her face lighting up with pleasure. "I believe that Iora Crites holds the key to the mystery of the Bird of Paradise. I may be able to secure it and I may need help. And if I should require assistance, who so able to give it as Mr. Nicholas Carter?"

The detective, after seriously pondering the matter, said: "I will go, in disguise, of course, but not so complete as to deceive you."

"Don't put too high an estimate on my shrewdness," she replied laughingly.

"But I sha'n't try to deceive you," was the response. "I shall be satisfied if Miss Crites does not recognize me."

Mildred Peyton was at the window when Nick reached the sidewalk. "Ah," she said to herself, "there is a detective after my own heart. He is more than a detective. He is a man. If there were no Wilfred James I might——" She sighed, left the window, and hummed a pathetic ballad. But soon her mind became occupied with the details of the journey to Florida.

At nine o'clock next morning Mrs. Bland, the hard-visaged nurse who had attended the sick woman in the Harlem flat, received the following message at her home in Morrisiana:

"There is a vacancy in the Pasteur Hospital, in Jersey City. It's yours if you apply for it. Your duties will begin this afternoon. You will not hear from me again until a fortnight has elapsed. Mum's the word. B."

The nurse showed no surprise at the contents of the note, but immediately prepared to follow the instructions that had been given her. The afternoon saw her installed as nurse in the Pasteur Hospital.

She had been gone from her Morrisiana home about an hour, when another message arrived. The bearer was a boy, who bore a striking resemblance to Miss Crites.

When the landlady of the house informed the messenger that Mrs. Bland had gone without stating where she was going, the messenger exhibited both surprise and alarm.

He left the house with a clouded brow. The written message he had undertaken to deliver was torn into fragments and the fragments thrown into the street.

The car which he presently boarded had gone out of sight, when a roughly dressed man with the face of a hobo might have been seen gathering carefully up the fragments of the message. The hobo was Patsy, and a couple of hours afterward Nick Carter, with the fragments properly placed, read these words:

"Hike to Boston and stay there until you receive further instructions. Iora has cooked up a scheme to toll Nick Carter and a cabbage-headed girl detective to Florida, where there is a deep hole ready for all enemies of the cause. I am afraid Nick may get onto my curves if he is allowed to do much more prospecting around New York. Therefore, it is a good thing that he is about to try the balmy air of Florida. When he is out of the way we'll have little trouble in settling with Chick and Patsy. Lie low and say nothing. B."

Patsy gave a grunt of disgust and wrath. "I don't claim to be a crackerjack; I never expect to set the world on fire, but such a slur as that stirs my bile. Chick gets it in the neck, too."

"Don't let a little thing like this worry you, Patsy," said Nick consolingly. "It was written to rile both you and Chick, as it was also written to deceive me."

"Do you mean that the note was a plant?"

"Sure; and the planting illustrates what I have said about the ways of women doing business in the criminal line. They can figure fairly well on what women will do, but they can't figure with any degree of certainty on what men will do. What will fool a woman will not always fool a man, and vice versa. This note business is plain amateur play. The next move may be something that will make the hair curl. But we will deal with what is before us. Miss Crites, dressed as a boy, went to Morrisiana, intending to tear up the note so you, or whoever my agent might be, could pick up the pieces. She had, I believe, another note which would have been delivered to Mrs. Bland, if the nurse had been at home."

"Does the Bird expect that this message will keep you from going to Florida?"

"By no means. She will expect me to be more determined than ever to take the trip. She will also expect me to put Miss Peyton on her guard."

"Queer program for a person with any sense, Mr. Carter."

"So it appears at first blush. But you must bear in mind that the Bird is a queer article. She has a good many cards up her sleeve, and she is counting on giving me the surprise of my life. I may be mistaken, but I think she is counting without her host."

"It was fool policy to tell you that Miss Crites is onto Miss Peyton's game," insisted Patsy stubbornly.

"In telling me something I already suspected, was almost sure of, in fact. A stroke of bad policy? Hardly. It shows cunning as well as daring. I didn't tell Miss Peyton that I did not believe she had succeeded in deceiving Iora Crites, for I thought, and still think, that the game can be played better with Miss Peyton in ignorance of some of the points in it."

"I'll bet she can take care of herself," said Patsy warmly.

"I'll bet she can, too," rejoined Nick, "and she is going to make my work easy."

"How long do you expect to be absent in Florida?" asked the young detective.

"I may not go to Florida."

In blank astonishment Patsy looked at his chief. "May not go?" he ejaculated. "Why, I thought it was a sure thing. Have you changed your mind within the past ten minutes?"

"No," replied Nick quietly. "I have not changed my mind, but I may change it. I have got to further consider the note that Miss Crites dropped for you to pick up."

"If you don't go you will disappoint the Bird, and make her think that you see through her game. I thought it was your intention to play into her hands while holding out the winning cards."

"I mean to play into her hands only when I can assist my own. I may be suspected of trying to prevent the trip to Florida, and the Bird, learning that I have done something she had not expected me to do, may instruct Miss Crites to remain in New York for the present. Well, what must be, must be. Of course, if Miss Crites goes to Florida, somebody that looks like me will go on the same train. To be plain, Patsy, the plan was to have Chick go in my place. He has made up to represent me on several occasions, as you are aware, and could do the trick to the queen's taste. But, in all probability, the disappearance of Mrs. Bland will alarm the Bird, and she will see the necessity of having with her in New York her most valuable assistant, and that person, I take it, is Iora Crites."

"Miss Peyton will be greatly disappointed at the change."

"Naturally, but I'll find other work for her to do. I am not dissatisfied with the outlook, for when I sent you to Morrisiana with the forged message, I half expected to have Mrs. Bland's departure discovered before the day was out."

"You must have had specimens of the Bird's handwriting. Where did you get them?"

"From Frank Baxter. She worked for him, you know, before she had cultivated her powers of evil."

"Is Mrs. Bland in a safe place?"

"She will be in one before dark," answered Nick grimly. "I am going over to Jersey right away, and when I finish my talk with the woman I think I'll have the Bird in a tight place."

"You must have a grip on the nurse."

"I have got her record. During the past week I have made use of the telegraph, and to some purpose. Mrs. Bland is a woman that the chief of police of St. Louis is most anxious to get hold of. She ran a baby-farm near that city, and the deaths were so many and frequent that an investigation was ordered. Before it opened she secretly left the State. If ever she is taken back to St. Louis she will have to answer to several charges of murder."

The conversation soon ended, and Nick made ready for his trip to Jersey City.

Chick was overdue and he soon appeared.

The great detective expected to be shadowed, and he proceeded to make plans for fooling the tracker.

Chick had come in disguised as a well-to-do farmer. A heavy brown beard covered his face.

The farmer was the first to leave the building. He went down the street to Broadway, and, taking a cab, was driven to the Grand Central Station.

Shortly after his departure from the house a stoutly built, prosperous-looking business man came down the steps and sauntered slowly to Fifth Avenue. Here he waited for a few minutes, then proceeded to Sixth Avenue, presently got on an "L" car and rode to Chambers Street. Here he alighted, and instead of going to the ferry went east, nor stopped until he reached the Brooklyn Bridge. He crossed to Brooklyn, went to the Fulton Ferry, and in one of the buildings in that vicinity was lost sight of. Half an hour after his disappearance a typical Bowery bouncer took passage on the ferry-boat of the annex line and landed at the Montgomery slip at Jersey City. An hour later this same individual was admitted to the office of the superintendent of the Pasteur Hospital.

CHAPTER VI.

THE DEED OF A FIEND.

Without having been shadowed Nick Carter had made the journey to the hospital. He had taken pains to render the enterprise of a spy a barren one, but his acuteness had been exercised for naught. Satisfied from the observations he had made that he had not been followed one step of the way, he entered the office of the superintendent with a mind ill at ease. It was possible that he was giving the Bird of Paradise credit for shrewdness which she did not possess, but his forebodings insisted that the possibility was remote.

"I am Mr. Carter," said the pseudo tough, "and I have come to have a talk with Mrs. Bland."

"Yes, yes," returned the superintendent, as he shook Nick's hand warmly. "She is in the steward's office. I told you I would give her something to-day to occupy her time, and so I put her at work on the steward's accounts."

Nick breathed more freely on hearing this statement.

"And—she has not seen any one, of course?"

"Only your messenger."

"Only my messenger?" The detective was both surprised and irritated. "I sent no messenger."

The superintendent bit his lips in vexation and shame. "Then I have been taken in by an angel-faced kid. Too bad, too bad, but," his face clearing, "you are probably here in time to spoil any game the kid was trying to work."

"Tell me all about it," said Nick soberly.

"Well, about an hour ago a most prepossessing youth was shown into this office. He said he had come from your residence and had an important commission to execute. Business which could not be neglected would prevent you from coming to the hospital as soon as you had intended. Mrs. Bland was, he continued, both sharp and suspicious. She might take a notion to leave the hospital before you arrived. To make it certain that she would stay you had forged another note of instructions. All that the boy wished to do was to deliver the note into Mrs. Bland's hands.

"The story seemed straight, but caution suggested a change in the messenger's program. I told him I would deliver the note if the contents satisfied me.

"The messenger smiled and shook his head. It was your wish, he said, that he should hand the note to the nurse, for he had been instructed to watch carefully the expression of the woman's face while the note was being read. This sounded plausible, and I then requested the boy to give me the note. He complied without hesitation. The message was this:

"'The detectives are on a warm trail. Keep close indoors. Will try to see you to-morrow. B.'

"I saw nothing off color in that message, Mr. Carter, and I informed the boy that he had my permission to deliver it. But I did not allow him to go to the steward's office or to see Mrs. Bland alone. I insisted that the delivery must be made in my presence, and that after having executed his commission the boy should immediately leave the hospital. There was no objection, and this program was carried out. The nurse came into the office, the boy handed her the note, the woman read it, turned pale, sighed, and then with bowed head left the room."

The story told, Nick Carter, with serious countenance, said: "I must see Mrs. Bland at once."

The superintendent led the way to the steward's office. The steward was there, but no one else.

"Where is Mrs. Bland?" questioned the superintendent sharply.

"She went into that bedroom"—pointing—"about half an hour ago. She said she was not feeling well and would lie down for awhile."

Nick Carter reached the bedroom door ahead of the superintendent. It was unlocked, and he quickly turned the knob and entered.

Upon a couch lay the nurse. Her white apron covered her face and both hands clutched the pillow. With a strong suspicion of the truth the detective stepped to the couch and lifted the apron.

A ghostly sight met his gaze.

The features were distorted and there was foam about the lips. The eyes were wide open and staring.

Nick felt of the pulse and then turned and faced the superintendent.

"Dead," he said. "She has poisoned herself."

The superintendent was astounded. "Could that note have scared her into suicide? It doesn't seem possible."

The detective, whose eyes had been roving about the room, stooped and picked up a piece of note-paper which lay near the foot of the couch. There was writing upon it, and after he had read the words he said, with a glum expression: "The note you read and which you thought was delivered to Mrs. Bland did not scare the woman into suicide, for she never received it. There was sleight-of-hand work, and another note, this one, reached Mrs. Bland's hands and made her long for death."

The superintendent stared dumbly at the detective.

"It was a very neat trick," continued Nick, whose coolness was returning, "and I am not blaming you for being taken in by it. Here is what the note says: 'You have more than once said that you would never allow yourself to be taken back to St. Louis alive. If I were in your place I should hold to that resolution. I have learned, no matter how, that that devil, Nick Carter, has got your St. Louis record. You are not at the hospital by any order or warning of mine; you were lured there by Nick Carter, and, of course, he intends to take you to St. Louis. Which do you prefer, the gallows, or the chair? B.'"

There was a short period of silence. It was broken by the superintendent. "This Bird of Paradise is the devil's own sister. You have got a tough job on your hands."

"It might be easier."

"How in the name of all that's wonderful did she learn that Mrs. Bland was here?"

"She has many spies and they are rapid workers. The nurse was traced from Morrisiana. I anticipated that the discovery of Mrs. Bland's whereabouts would be made, but I did not think that it would be made so soon. If I could have been permitted to have had my interview with the woman the discovery would have been shorn of value. Well, it is a severe blow, but, as

the same time, matters have been simplified. I have one less road to travel. The truth was in Mrs. Bland, but there are others who possess her knowledge. Perhaps" —after a pause—"the Bird may have played into my hands as well as her own."

Nick returned to New York, and his face was serene when he met Chick and Patsy.

After he had acquainted them with what had taken place in Jersey City he said: "Again circumstances alter cases. The trip to Florida will now be made. The Bird has disposed of the one obstacle in the way of her Florida program. What is the object of the trip?"

"To put Nick Carter out of the way," said Chick quickly.

"Yes, but how?"

"I think we had better leave it to you to find out," remarked Patsy. "You are a corker at guessing."

Nick paced the den with wrinkled brow.

"I'll make a change in my own program," he announced, "and then, perhaps, I may be able to guess."

He shook himself, mentally, and walking to the phone called up Mildred Peyton.

That young lady was at home, and the following conversation took place:

"Hello! That you, Miss Peyton?"

"Yes. Mr. Carter, isn't it?"

"Correct. It's all settled that you are to go to-morrow, I suppose?"

"Why, certainly," in surprise. "You are going, aren't you?"

"Yes. Eh—have you talked with Miss Crites lately?"

"We talked over the phone not fifteen minutes ago. It is to be the ten-o'clock train, remember. We go by the B. & O. to Philadelphia and then change."

"I understand. How are you feeling?"

"Never better. But Wilfred doesn't like my plan. He says it smacks of the stage. He wanted awfully to go with me, but, of course, I could not agree to such a proposition."

"Certainly not. Well, good-by."

Before the great detective's day's work ended he disposed of one matter.

He arranged with the superintendent of the Pasteur Hospital and the police of Jersey City to have kept secret for the present the identity of the woman who had poisoned herself. Before the expiration of a week he hoped to be in a position to acquaint the chief of police of St. Louis with the fact that the baby-farm murderess had ended her crime-stained life.

Next day Iora Crites and Honoria Mullaly, her maid, were passengers on the train for Philadelphia. For reasons of her own Miss Crites chose a day coach for the ride. Perhaps it afforded her better opportunity to scan the faces of the other passengers.

At Philadelphia the two women transferred to the south-bound express, taking a stateroom in a Pullman.

There were but two other occupants of this car. One was a fine-looking man of middle age, with coal-black hair and a heavy mustache. He might have been a lawyer or a financier if appearance and manner counted for anything.

The second Pullman passenger was an old man of benevolent aspect. In his bag was a medicine-case, and the frequency with which he consulted it indicated that he was either a physician, or a layman who was his own doctor.

Each occupied a section, and there was no intercourse between them. The old man passed the most of his time reading a medical journal; the other found interest in the scenery.

While the train was rumbling along south of Washington, the door of the stateroom opened and Honoria Mullaly came out. Passing along the aisle toward the farther door she caught the eye of the black-haired passenger. She smiled slightly and he smiled in return. Not a word was spoken, nor did she stop in her walk.

He opened the door, crossed to the next Pullman, and entered it, to be gone about five minutes.

On repassing the man with the black hair she looked straight ahead.

In the middle of the afternoon the train stopped at a large town. While it was at a standstill a boy entered the Pullman, and saying pleasantly, "The compliments of the company," opened a paper bag which he held in his hand and drew out two oranges. One he tossed into the lap of the old man; the other he handed to the younger passenger.

Then, with a bow, he proceeded to the stateroom and left the oranges there.

As the boy alighted from the train with the empty bag crushed in his hand a dapper young man standing on the car platform observed him curiously. Presently the young man lifted his head and looked through the open door of the Pullman. At that moment the old man was standing in the aisle peeling his orange. A secret signal passed, and the dapper youth left the train and was in the station when the engine again started.

Five minutes went by, and then the old man, who had finished the peeling operation but had not eaten of the orange, saw the black-haired man fall forward in his seat. Quickly following the fall came groans and shrieks from the stateroom.

The old man, after one glance at the prostrate passenger, hurried to the quarters of the two women.

What he saw when he opened the door was a harrowing sight. On the floor lay Miss Crites, rigid in death, and in one of the berths the maid, in convulsions.

Strange to say, the old man had with him his bag with the medicine-case. Quickly getting it out he bent over

the dead woman and utilized his sense of smell. Arising with a nod of the head he opened a phial and forced some of the contents down the maid's throat. Next he made use of the pitcher of ice-water which stood upon a shelf over the wash-bowl.

After he had worked a few minutes the paroxysms ceased and the patient broke into a profuse perspiration. Vomiting succeeded, and after that a lassitude that was without danger.

Leaving the maid, the old man returned to the open compartment of the car.

The black-haired man's body had slipped to the floor and lay without motion.

The old man was examining the body when the conductor entered.

"What's up?" he asked. "Is the man drunk?"

"No," was the grave reply. "He is dead. A terrible crime has been committed. There is a dead woman in the stateroom and another who came within an ace of dying."

"Great Heaven! Who did it? Where is the assassin?"

"Time may answer your questions. It is a very queer as well as a monstrous affair," was the reply.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MAZES OF THE PLOT.

Richmond was reached shortly after the tragic occurrences in the Pullman. The bodies of the two victims were removed to the station waiting-room and a cab conveyed the prostrated maid to a hotel. The old man, who gave his name as Doctor Pradius, and who said he was from Baltimore, had the bodies covered with sheets and then telephoned to police headquarters.

On the arrival of the chief of police and the coroner Doctor Pradius told his story. The telling took some time and comprised matters that were outside the facts of the car tragedy.

The chief and the coroner listened with astonishment, and at the conclusion of the tale pressed the doctor's hand heartily.

After the bodies had been given into the custody of the coroner, Doctor Pradius hurried to the hotel where Honoria Mullaly had been taken, and found the maid recovered so as to be able to sit up. She was very weak and pale and her eyes were unnaturally bright. They filled with tears and her form shook as the old man came forward and took her hand.

"My destination is Dinwiddie," he explained, "but this awful affair requires my presence in Richmond until after the inquest."

The young woman shuddered and covered her face with her hands.

"My friend—is he indeed dead?" she asked faintly.

"Your friend?"

"Yes; the man with the black mustache."

Doctor Pradius gently and sorrowfully answered: "He is dead."

A fit of violent weeping succeeded the sad statement. It was some time before the maid was able to compose herself sufficiently to continue the conversation.

The doctor regarded her with a grave countenance.

"I like your face. I believe you are a good man," she said, at last. "I am going to tell you something. I suppose I will have to tell it at the inquest, anyhow."

"If it has any bearing on the murders I shall be pleased to hear it," he said.

"It has, and I hope my revelations will enable the police to catch the murderer.

"I am not a lady's-maid. I am a gentlewoman. My name is Mildred Peyton, and I came South for the purpose of assisting the great detective, Mr. Nicholas Carter, in one of the most important cases he has ever undertaken."

Then followed a narration of facts with which the reader is acquainted.

At the conclusion Doctor Pradius said with decision: "Mr. Carter must be notified at once."

"Too late," was the choking reply. "He is dead. The man with the black mustache was the great detective."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the doctor. "He would never have allowed himself to fall into a trap of that kind."

"Detectives are but human, doctor, and poor Mr. Carter, with all his shrewdness, was caught napping. The plot was daringly conceived. Who would have suspected that a boy entering the Pullman at a way station and enacting a rôle that is not new, was the agent of a fiend in human form, and that the innocent-looking oranges were the vehicles of assassination? The scheme would have deceived a smarter man than Mr. Carter."

"Yes, yes," assented Doctor Pradius, "it was a cunning, a devilish plot."

"Something tells me that the boy with the oranges was a woman in disguise. Might she not have been the Bird of Paradise?"

"She might, indeed. A part of that kind would not likely have been entrusted to a subordinate. The risks were too great. Besides, who but this arch-plotter herself would know to whom to give the oranges? And yet—and yet——"

"What, doctor?"

"Why should the Bird of Paradise have poisoned her lieutenant, Iora Crites?"

Mildred Peyton answered quickly: "Because she wanted to rid herself of a tool who knew too much. Why did she send a note that caused Mrs. Bland to commit suicide? For a similar reason. Don't you see?"

Doctor Pradius looked at the flushed face of the lovely woman with admiring eyes.

"I believe you have solved the mystery. You would make a fine detective."

"I shall do my utmost to find the person who distributed the oranges," Miss Peyton replied, with vengeful vehemence.

When the doctor took his leave he promised to keep her informed of the movements of the coroner and the chief of police.

After a call at the telegraph office and the receipt of a telegram from Glen Allen, he proceeded to a lodging-house in the outskirts.

Entering a room on the second floor, he was greeted by a well-dressed, stoutly built man, whose manner was nervous and whose face wore an expression of eager expectancy.

It was the black-haired man of the Pullman, the supposed victim of the poisoner.

The doctor was the first to speak.

"Well, Chick," said he, with a broad smile, "how have you enjoyed yourself?"

"Poorly, Nick. I have been on tenter-hooks ever since I slipped out of the morgue. Any news?"

"Yes. Patsy is hot on the trail of the poisoner. The arrest may be made to-night."

"Good for Patsy. That was a good play of yours. Patsy was in his place at the right time, and he must have acted the moment the boy left the train."

"He did, and though there was nothing positive then to go upon, he kept track of the boy until he got my wire sent from the railway station here."

Nick Carter, otherwise Doctor Pradius, sat down, and a long confidential talk followed.

The great detective had, he thought, played a shrewd and successful game.

Resolving at the last moment to accompany Iora Crites and Honoria Mullaly to Florida, he distributed his forces with the acumen of a master tactician.

Chick, made up to represent Nick in partial disguise, was assigned the rôle which the Bird of Paradise expected the great detective to play.

Patsy, instructed as to his part in the coming drama, went in the Pullman next to the one to which the two women had been assigned.

Nick himself, as Doctor Pradius, took a position from whence, at the moment of danger, he might be able to take the center of the stage.

Feeling sure that the Florida trip spelled murder, he studied the matter long and carefully, and at last arrived at the conclusion that an attempt at poisoning would be made.

To guard against a possible slip, he procured a medicine-case and filled it with various antidotes for poisons.

The nurse had used prussic acid to end her life. Its action is quick if discrimination is used in the dose, and Nick had a shrewd idea that this poison would be employed on the railway trip.

How the murderous plot would be carried out he could not guess. But he kept his eyes open, and when the boy entered the Pullman, at a way station near Richmond, he was seized with the conviction that the means and manner of assassination had been discovered.

Patsy had been instructed to ride on the platform of the car, and to keep an eye on Nick. When the orange boy left the Pullman, after having disposed of his fruit, the young detective, gazing sharply at the fellow, believed that the time for action had come. A nod from Nick, and he was off the train and on the trail of the boy.

Chick, warned by a look and a whisper from Nick, peeled his orange, made as if to eat it, but managed to allow half the orange to slide down his sleeve. He then entered upon the other details of his part of deception.

These and other incidents were gone over, and then Chick asked: "Why did you not show your hand to Miss Peyton? If she is to help us, it seems to me she ought to know what you are doing. Don't you think it was rather cruel to allow her to believe that you are dead?"

"I thought of all this," returned Nick, "when I went to her room. Let us look at the matter in this way: She has had a narrow escape. She is still very weak, is not yet able to act with composure. Hovering over us, as it were, is that terrible Bird of Paradise. She may be in Richmond at this very moment. She may, through some devilish agency, be able to ascertain how Mildred Peyton looks and feels. It is better that, for the present, the Bird should believe that Honoria Mullaly honestly accepts, as does the Bird herself, the fatal story of the Pullman."

Chick caught a queer smile on his chief's face, as the words were spoken, but he answered quickly: "Whatever you say goes. There is more in your head than the Bird gives you credit for." Then he added: "Have you wired Wilfred James?"

"Yes."

"And how long am I, posing as you, to remain dead? Until after the capture of the Bird?"

"Perhaps, and perhaps the time will be shortened."

"I don't understand."

"And I would prefer not to explain until there are new developments."

Nick fell into a brown study. "I have a feeling—it has just come over me—that all is not as it appears to be. I am expecting a messenger. He will bring something that may settle a doubt that has crept into my mind."

"What will he bring?"

"The report of an analytical chemist. Before I left

the Pullman I gathered up, sorted, and marked the pieces of orange that had not been eaten. They were sent to a chemist, with instructions to make a quick analysis. If the poison used was prussic acid, the chemist had an easy task before him. I am convinced that the poison was prussic acid, for the smell was that of bitter almonds."

Ten minutes later the messenger appeared.

Nick took the written report, paid the messenger, and then, in some agitation, though he tried hard to be cool, read what the chemist had discovered.

Chick noted that his face changed as he read. The signs of agitation disappeared and the eyes snapped fire, as he looked up and said: "We have been outwitted." His mouth hardened. "But the trick shall not avail." Then a smile played about his lips. "The Bird is a bird, and that's no lie!"

Chick was devoured with curiosity, and Nick at once satisfied it.

"The report says that exhibit number one—sample of the orange eaten by Miss Crites—contained prussic acid in quantity to cause death; that sample number two—Miss Peyton's orange—is a duplicate of sample number one; that sample number three—this is your orange, Chick—contained no trace of poison."

"Gee whiz!" ejaculated Chick. "What does it mean?"

"After I have finished we will discuss that point," replied Nick imperturbably. "Sample number four—here is where I come in—contained enough prussic acid to kill an elephant."

Chick sat stupefied. "Well, of all the surprises!" he at last managed to say. "What are we butting into?"

"A game, Chick, that to win, requires a cool head and a marked deck."

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE FIEND'S PRESENCE.

"There are two ways of viewing the case," continued Nick Carter. "The Bird of Paradise may have seen through my game, and have penetrated my disguise. She then may have directed one of her tools, the orange boy, to give a poisoned orange to each of three persons. You were excepted for a reason that I cannot guess."

"Let me try, then," interrupted Chick. "She fears you; she does not fear me. With you out of the way, her conquest of me would be easy." Chick had not forgotten the sneering reference in the note she had sent to Nick in New York. But his tone was not bitter. He affected an easiness that caused a flicker of a smile to appear on Nick's face.

"Passing the reason for your exemption, Chick, I come to the poisoning of Iora Crites. Mildred Peyton was probably right when she said that the murder of the woman was planned because she knew too much, and might be a cause of serious annoyance in the future."

"But why, if I was put on the free list, was not Miss Peyton accorded the same mark of favor?" asked Chick.

"Many reasons might explain that, but one will do. Miss Peyton is a woman, and the Bird fears her own sex more than she does ours. Miss Peyton was, besides, getting on close terms of intimacy with Iora Crites. Do you see the danger?"

"I see that you know how to wriggle out of a corner," Chick grinned. "I can give a better reason."

"Let's hear it."

"It was never intended that Miss Peyton should be killed. I got her orange, and she got mine."

Nick Carter's eyes twinkled with appreciation of the situation.

"I am satisfied you are wrong," he said. "It would be more plausible to say that I got yours, and you got mine. I have said that there are two ways of looking at the case. One is, as I indicated, that I was given a poisoned orange because the old man was believed to be Nick Carter. The other way implies the making of a mistake. You were on the list as Nick Carter, and the orange boy gave you the wrong orange."

Chick took a new tack.

"The Bird must have some underlying motive in her operations of the last few days," he observed. "My opinion is that she is preparing some new coup, and is burning her bridges."

"My opinion is the same," replied Nick. "So far, she has had but three confederates who can be safely put down as intimates. Mrs. Bland and Iora Crites are dead. The last of the trio is the woman who played the orange boy. Her doom is sealed, for if Patsy fails to catch her the Bird will put her out of the way. The other members of the band are, I think, of the lower class, and they have performed the work assigned to them without having seen or talked with their shrewd and unscrupulous employer. With her three lieutenants and confidantes effectually disposed of, the Bird would believe herself to be in a position to laugh at discovery."

"You should add 'with Nick Carter also disposed of,' to state the situation fairly."

"Oh, as to that," said Nick, with a shrug, "she either thinks she has already disposed of me, or that she will have no difficulty in doing so."

There were no further developments during the day.

The next morning an announcement appeared in each of the daily papers that the inquest over the remains of the Pullman victims had been postponed for two days.

Toward noon Patsy reported in person to Nick. He was in a wrathful humor, and the great detective knew before a word was spoken that his young assistant had met with a reverse.

"Lost him by a fluke," Patsy scowlingly announced.

"Trailed him to this city, and was about to put my clam-twisters on him, when bif! a bicycle struck me, and I went down like a thousand of brick."

"We can't guard against accidents," was Nick's consoling response. "You have done your best; you have done well, and you have nothing to reproach yourself with."

"A hunter has nothing to reproach himself with when he blazes away at a deer and his gun bursts!" snorted Patsy; "but he doesn't feel like dancing a jig, does he? Here I set out on a hunt. I sights my game. He leads me a merry chase, and just at the moment that sees me near enough to nab the beast a blanked idiot on a bicycle flattens me out like a pan-cake."

"Where did the accident occur?" questioned Chick.

"On Pulaski Avenue. The kid—he's a girl, all right—got onto the fact that I was chasing him, and when the run was getting hot he scoots across the street, intending, I think, to make for a narrow alley on the other side. I hikes after him, with my lamps trimmed for nothing but my quarry, when I and the bicycle had our little mix-up. Of course, when I got to my feet the kid was nowhere in sight."

For some reason Nick Carter did not show disappointment over the relation of Patsy's mishap.

"I'll wager you have accomplished more than you think you have," he said pleasantly.

"I have accomplished nothing," replied Patsy sourly.

"Let's see. You did not get the kid, but you know who he is. That's something."

"Yes; I know that. He's a girl, I told you."

"Tell me more. What is her name, and what is her record?"

"Her name is Sally Horton, and down Pearl Street way they call her 'Smooth Sal.'"

"I have heard of her doings. She is a slick one, sure."

A look at Nick's composed face chased the scowl from Patsy's brow. "Think you can make a pointer out of this knowledge?" he asked.

"I hope to. By the way, what has she been doing lately?"

"I don't know. She has been keeping mighty quiet, that's certain. I spotted her when she got off the train. She doesn't know me, but it was not long before she discovered that I was following her."

"She came to Richmond to report to the Bird," was Chick's comment.

"The Bird in this city!" exclaimed Patsy, in astonishment.

Nick was about to answer, when there came a knock at the door. He opened it, to confront a ragged urchin, who held in his hand a sealed envelope.

"Dat Prajus heah'bout?"

"I am he."

"Then this heah's for you all."

Nick took the envelope, at the same time laying a detaining hand on the lad's arm.

"Who gave you this?" he asked.

"A lady."

"Where?"

"Down by the depot."

"Had you ever seen her before?"

"No, suh."

"Can you describe her—tell me how she looked?"

"She was right peart-appearin', but I did not see her face."

"Wore a veil, did she?"

The lad nodded his head, and then Nick let him go.

"The little fellow told the truth," he said, as he turned to Chick and Patsy. "I know an honest face when I see one."

The note which the envelope contained was from the Bird of Paradise, and the reading of it made Nick scratch his head in perplexity. But soon he felt himself equal to the situation.

"Just listen to this, boys," he said. "For sheer audacity the Bird takes the cup.

"'To the Illustrious Doctor Pradius, sometimes known as Mr. Nicholas Carter: Why that disguise? Why try to impose such a childish deception on me? Do you know, I have been laughing in my sleeve all the time you have been strutting about in your doctor's rags and imagining that you had played a trick that would surely enable you to reach the goal of your ambition? But though I despise your occupation, I admire your nerve.' The admiration is reciprocal," muttered the reader. "'I have, really, a respect for Mr. Carter as a man, and because of that respect, and for some reasons of a purely personal nature, I am desirous of having a heart-to-heart talk with you. The talk, if it shall take place, will, I hope, be to my advantage. At the same time, it will not be to your disadvantage. Am I paradoxical, or enigmatical? Guess what I am up to, if you can.'"

Nick Carter paused, and scrutinized the countenances of his assistants. Patsy looked puzzled. Chick was smiling.

"She is a rare Bird, isn't she?" the great detective remarked, the corners of his mouth twitching with the grim humor of the situation.

"Go on," urged Chick. "She has some proposition to make. What is it?"

"A very fair one, on its face." Nick then went on with his reading:

"'I am a queer compound, as you must admit. I follow no stereotyped rules of conduct. I am nothing if not original. I am daring, but I take less chances than the majority of people who defy the law and prey upon society. I dare to expect that you will endorse my plan and cheerfully accept your part in it. There are many things within my knowledge which you would be glad to know. If we shall meet I will be frank with you. You

must have a strong desire to see and converse with the mysterious Bird of Paradise. You shall have the chance, and shall run no risk. Consent to my terms, and not a hair of your head shall be harmed. I say this upon my honor, and I have a supply of that respectable article, in spite of what the world thinks.

"To come to the point: I will meet you in a room of one of the leading hotels, and you may, if you like, take a policeman with you, who shall wait outside the room while our conversation is going on, and who shall be instructed to enter the room the moment that he hears your signal. But there will be no signal, for, as I have said, there will be no danger. All I demand from you is that there shall be no espionage. You must solemnly promise that you will not go to the appointment for the purpose of placing me under arrest, and that I shall not be followed after I leave the hotel at the close of the interview. Will you take the bait? Will you seize the opportunity to feast your eyes on the quarry you have been pursuing, believing, as I insist you shall believe, that no harm shall befall you? If you agree to the proposed interview, display a handkerchief at your front window at two o'clock sharp. The handkerchief will be seen, and an hour afterward you will receive a second note from me, giving the name of the hotel, the number of the room, and the hour for the appointment, which must be to-night. THE BIRD OF PARADISE."

"Well, boys," said Nick, "what do you think of this epistle?"

"If the proposition she makes is on the square," was the comment of Chick, "you stand a chance, Nick, of scoring a point."

The great detective looked steadily at his shrewd assistant for a moment. "You reason well," he returned. "If the Bird could have looked at my hand she would never have proposed the interview. I am glad it is to be to-night, for with this missive before me I realize that the hour to strike is close at hand."

"You intend to see her, then, on her own terms?" inquired Patsy.

"I do. I think I am onto her game. It is a daring one, a shrewd one, a Satanic one; but, armed as I am, I hope to circumvent her. I am convinced that I will meet with no harm in that room. This, her latest plot, which is a deep one, does not contemplate my death. But," with a tightening of the jaw muscles, "there is murder at the bottom of it, Chick. You must pass the evening with Mildred Peyton. You must stay with her until I make my appearance after my interview with the Bird of Paradise. There will be no murder, if I can prevent it."

At two o'clock the handkerchief was displayed from the window of Nick Carter's room.

An hour afterward a second note, delivered by a boy younger than the one who had brought the first note, was placed in the detective's hands.

It stated that the hour was eight o'clock, place the Dominion Hotel, number of room eighty-three.

Chick and Patsy were each given careful instructions, and at eight Nick Carter, as Doctor Pradius, was admitted to the room where awaited him the terrible Bird of Paradise.

CHAPTER IX.

A STRANGE INTERVIEW.

The room was a small one, and was the reception-room of a suite. It was sparingly furnished. In an alcove was a couch, and disposed about the apartment were half a dozen chairs.

As Nick Carter stepped into the room—he had given one knock at the door, and a rather shrillish voice had answered, "Come in"—he saw arise from the couch a short, slight woman, with a great mass of blond hair, theatrically arranged, and a sharp face, which might have been beautiful had there been less of paint and powder. She looked like an actress made up for the stage.

Her voice was unpleasant. It was high and unmusical. When she smiled, and the smiles were frequent, she displayed two upper teeth of gold.

"I am pleased—exceedingly pleased—to meet you," was her greeting, as she held out a shapely hand, the fingers of which were covered with rings. "I was afraid that at the last moment you might back out."

Taking the chair to which she motioned, the detective regarded her fixedly. A self-satisfied smile hovered about her lips during the scrutiny.

"I am a sight worth seeing, am I not?" she asked, giving her hair a pat as she spoke.

Nick, with impassive face, replied: "I hope to get the equivalent of my money."

"Yes?" with a slight uplifting of the eyebrow.

"A talk with you, a study of your character, as indicated by your countenance and your speech, ought to have value in determining my actions in the future."

"Yes, it ought; but will it?" She gave a low laugh, and again gave her hair a pat.

"She is nervous," thought Nick, "though she is trying her level best to appear composed."

The Bird arose, settled her skirt more satisfactorily, and then, in a harsher tone than she had yet used, came down to business.

"I have requested this interview, Mr. Carter, because I hate to see a good man wasting his time in trying to catch a will-o'-the-wisp. When I leave this room to-night it will be beyond your power to harm the Bird of Paradise." She spoke with conviction, and Nick Carter allowed an expression of dismay to steal over his face.

"You have done all that mortal man could do to earn that big fee from the Merchants' Committee, but to-night will see you at the end of your rope. I will not, of course, expose my hand, but I assure you that the cards I hold are invincible."

"You may be able to do all you have planned, Miss Thurber"—she looked gratified at this mark of respect—"but, if you pursue your evil courses, retribution will surely one day overtake you."

She patted her hair again, drew a deep breath, and replied: "Suppose I have concluded to drop crime, reform, and become a useful and honest member of society—what then?"

The detective repressed a shudder of repulsion as he gazed at her.

She went on, more easily: "I am young, and the world is before me. What I have done in the past has been under compulsion of a demoniac force. For years I was not a sane human being. It is only lately that I have been able to see things as they are. I will tell you my story, and, as you are a sympathetic man, I know that you will not wrongfully judge me. Three years ago I arrived in New York an innocent, right-minded girl. I loved my father, and I was the apple of his eye. For many months all went well with me. I held a good position, and my associates were as pure-minded and as honestly ambitious as myself. One day I fell ill. For weeks I was at death's door. The disease was typhoid fever. If you have ever talked with physicians, or have studied medical reports, you will know that not infrequently the disease, having run its course, leaves the victim mentally unbalanced. There have been cases in which the last sad offices have been performed in asylums for the insane.

"In my case, physical health and, as I thought, cold reason returned. But when I resumed my work I found that my ideas of right and wrong had undergone a radical change. I coveted the property of others. I became a petty thief. I went further. I used information gathered in copying my employers' letters, and for awhile did a good business in Wall Street. But detection came. I was discharged, and no honest employment was open to me. I found I had a sharp wit. I cultivated it, and gradually drew about me a band of lawbreakers, who gladly recognized me as their leader.

"I will now tell you what you must have surmised. Though I controlled the actions of the band, only three knew me as Mirabird Thurber. The rank and file of my adherents were East Siders, and I had them all thoroughly drilled by my lieutenants, who had first been drilled by myself. The work we have done speaks for itself. To-day a reward of fifty thousand dollars will be paid to the person who is lucky enough to capture me."

She crossed her hands on her knee, and regarded the detective with an inscrutable expression.

As Nick had no comment to make, she remarked: "I can guess what is in your mind. You are saying to yourself, 'This Bird is wearing borrowed plumage. She thinks she is deceiving me, but she isn't.'"

Nick smiled queerly.

"Do you pride yourself on being a mind-reader?" he asked.

"What is your opinion?"

"You would not regard my opinion as worth anything."

"You refuse to give it, then. But I can draw inferences."

"Will you give me the benefit of one?"

"Certainly. You think I am a bogus Bird of Paradise."

Nick Carter laughed. "I thought you gave me credit for ordinary perception and discrimination. I have never for a moment doubted that you are the great original."

The woman unconsciously dropped a sigh. It was a sigh of relief. The detective remarked carelessly: "You seem to be pleased with my acknowledgment of your identity with the notorious New York criminal."

"I am not ill pleased," was the frank reply. "It would be a slap at my vanity to discover that you had failed to recognize the real thing when you had seen it."

Nick bowed profoundly. "It would show rank idiocy to deny that you are a bird—the Bird."

Miss Thurber laughed shrilly. "Do you know, I am afraid of you when you speak like that?" she said.

"Nonsense. You hold all the cards, you know."

This was said banteringly. The woman frowned.

Nick's face took on a serious expression. "Jesting aside, Miss Thurber, I will say frankly that you do not always amuse me. You have startled me more than once. Admitting this, will you permit me to ask you a few questions?"

"You might ask without permission. And"—with a shrug—"I can answer, or not, as I see fit. You must not expect that I will compromise myself."

"My questions will have reference to what has been done in the past. I shall not touch upon your plans for the future."

"Little good would it do you if you did."

"Question number one: How did you work the drowned-woman trick?"

"That detail was in the hands of Iora Crites."

"She acted under your instructions, did she not?"

"Certainly."

"Was the woman dead when the body was carried from the flat?"

"She was."

"Did you expect her to die that night?"

Mirabird Thurber hesitated a moment, then said defiantly: "I did. Don't shake your head and look at me as if I were a fiend. I know what your suspicion is. You smell another murder. Why should I not admit the crime? I am already accused of several murders. My chances are not lessened by an addition to the list. Besides, as I have said, to-night settles your account with

the Bird of Paradise, an account, by the way, that will be returned to you with the statement, 'no funds.' Mrs. Bland, as my agent, killed the woman. She would have died of the disease with which she was suffering. Mrs. Bland simply hastened the end."

She paused, and looked at Nick as if expecting a certain question. As the detective did not open his mouth, she said: "Why don't you ask me the name of the victim?"

"I have no curiosity in that quarter."

The Bird received this statement with inward joy. But her face was a mask as she proceeded: "I couldn't have told you if you had asked. Miss Crites furnished the woman. I don't know where she found her."

"Now for my second question," pursued the detective. "Why did you have my assistant, Chick, provided with an orange which contained no poison?"

The Bird uttered a gleeful laugh. "This is the best ever!" came the words, in a shrill ripple. "Don't you guess? No? Well, I am surprised. Why, he got the wrong orange. Up to the time of the arrival of the train at the Richmond station I would have sworn Chick was you."

This announcement made clear one of the reasons why the interview with Doctor Pradius had been sought by the Bird.

There was a wrathful note in the detective's voice as he addressed the woman of craft.

"So you were in doubt, after the train arrived, were you? And to solve that doubt you wrote to me, pretending that you had penetrated my disguise? You believed that the answer, or the appearance of the person addressed, would set you right?"

The Bird of Paradise actually giggled. "Certainly—certainly! Of course—of course!" she mirthfully responded.

Nick, who was not as ruffled as he pretended to be, smoothed his chin with his hand and appeared to be thinking deeply.

The next words of the Bird answered a question that had come into his mind.

"You are doubtless wondering why one orange was free of poison. Why one detective should be spared and another sacrificed. The explanation is simple. In the haste of preparation the supply of prussic acid gave out after three of the oranges had been treated. There was neither time nor opportunity to obtain a fresh supply. One victim must be spared. Chick was selected, but Chick was supposed to be the old doctor."

"Then, if I had eaten my orange, you would have won by a fluke."

"Yes; and it is a pity you did not eat it."

There was no acting now. The vengeful malice in her voice was the real article.

Nick Carter arose to his feet. He had heard enough, and he had no desire to longer remain in the same room with this repulsive moral pervert.

The Bird of Paradise did not attempt to detain him. "I am under deep obligations to you," she said, with a return to her former scoffing manner. "You have given me the points I wanted. I hope you have not found the evening an unprofitable one."

"To live is to learn," replied Nick, and then he took his leave.

When he had gone, the Bird stepped to the mirror and surveyed herself. There was an anxious look in her eyes.

"Have I deceived him? Have I?" She clenched her hands and compressed her lips. "I believe I have. If so, to-night ends all."

CHAPTER X.

HOW CHICK WAS TRICKED.

The hotel in which Mildred Peyton was staying was in the heart of the city. It was in the middle of a block having a continuous line of buildings. The only entrance from the street led to a court, on one side of which was the office. The passageway from the street was wide enough to permit a roadway for carriages and wagons and a narrow walk on either side.

At about the time that Nick Carter opened the door of the room which held the Bird of Paradise, Chick, more than half a mile away, was passing into the court on his way to the apartments of Mildred Peyton. In his new disguise, he bore no resemblance to the passenger in the Pullman.

At one side of the passageway Patsy had stationed himself. His duty was to note carefully the appearance of every person who should enter the court after Chick had gone out of sight. It was not expected that he would be able to make effective use of his eyes before the expiration of an hour. The danger that threatened Room 128—occupied by Mildred Peyton—would not become acute, according to Nick Carter's theory, until after the interview with the Bird of Paradise.

An hour went by, and nothing calculated to excite his suspicions met his eye. Men passed in and out, but they were either ordinary citizens, or respectable guests of the hotel. But one vehicle was driven into the court. This was a transfer-wagon, and it contained one large trunk. This wagon arrived a few minutes before nine o'clock.

How had Chick passed the hour? In entertaining and in being entertained. He had sent up a card, "Chickering Carter," and the answer came that Miss Peyton was in, and would be pleased to see him.

It was as Honoria Mullaly that the lovely occupant of Room 128 received her caller.

"You must pardon the disguise," she sweetly apologized, when Chick appeared before her, "for I have not yet had opportunity to change it. All the wardrobe of Mildred Peyton is in New York."

Chick, who had never seen her as the Southern beauty, could only assure her gallantly that no man of sense and discrimination could be otherwise than charmed with her present appearance.

Her eyes danced with mirth, but a serious mood quickly seized her.

"Of course, you know my trouble. I have lost one I had come to consider a dear friend, Mr. Nicholas Carter. Are you his brother?"

"No. I am his adopted son."

"Indeed!" looking at him curiously. "Strange that he never spoke of you."

"I don't think it occurred to him to speak of me. Or" —with an odd smile—"he might have thought it best to keep you in the dark regarding some of his moves. You are assisting him, and I know he counts on receiving valuable help from your hands. He often finds that his assistants work better if their minds are freed from details that do not bear directly on the work which he has cut out for them. I speak as one of the victims of the tactics he has often seen fit to adopt. He has more than once kept me in the dark respecting some of his work."

The young woman seemed not to give attention to Chick's concluding words. There was a hopeful expression on her face, and her lip trembled slightly as she quickly responded: "You speak as if Mr. Carter was not dead. That cannot be."

Chick's countenance beamed. "I am delighted to inform you that he was not a victim of the plot of the poisoner. He is alive. He visited you this forenoon."

A cry of joy burst from the lips of the disguised woman.

"Thank God!" she exclaimed. Then, with eager, happy face, she continued: "How did he escape? Tell me all about it."

Chick complied.

"And to think that I talked with him and did not know him. He is a wonderful man." Soon her brows contracted. "I think he might have told me," she said.

"If he made a mistake, it has been soon rectified, Miss Peyton. He asked me to tell you the truth, and begged me to say, also, that when he sees you he will explain matters to your complete satisfaction."

"I hope he will come to-night," she said. "He deserves to be both kissed and scolded."

"You should retain all your kisses for your intended husband, Mr. James," admonished Chick, in mock seriousness.

"Wilfred? That reminds me. He will be here to-morrow. A telegram came this afternoon."

"He will be glad to find that you have about recovered from your illness."

"Yes; and he will probably insist on my returning to New York at once."

"Perhaps you may find nothing to prevent an immediate return," said Chick meaningly.

She regarded him with wonder. "Is the game so near an end as that?" she asked.

"To-night may finish Nick Carter's work," was the sober reply.

Then, as he noted the effect of his words on his fair listener—an expression of pleasure was quickly succeeded by one of disappointment—he continued: "I can guess how you feel. You are disappointed because you think that the Bird of Paradise will be captured without your help."

"Your guess hits the truth," she said. "I so desired to make my services valuable. And what have I done? Nothing."

"There may be a chance for you yet," returned Chick. "I can't speak with a thorough understanding of Nick Carter's plans, but I think you figure in them."

She gave him a quick look. "You do? In what way?"

Chick hesitated a moment. Then he said gravely: "It is right that you should know something. You should be prepared in case of an error in Nick's calculations. I am here in your room this evening for the purpose of guarding you from harm. Nick Carter fears that to-night an attempt on your life may be made. I don't think, from my knowledge of Nick's preparations, that you will be in any danger. I am in the room, and there are guards outside. Nick himself will be here soon."

As he ceased speaking there came a knock at the door.

Chick, who was nearest, opened it, and a lad in uniform handed him a letter. "From the office," he explained, and went away.

The letter was addressed to "Nick Carter's Assistant, in Room 128." The envelope, opened, was found to contain a sheet of paper with these words written in pencil upon it: "You are probably Chick, and you are waiting for the coming of Nick Carter. I do not desire to keep you in suspense as to his fate. He is dead. Like the fool he was, he came to the appointment with me, believing that I would keep my word. The word of a thief and a murderer! I am both. I acknowledge it. I had sworn to have Nick Carter's life, and I have kept my oath. His dead body may be found in Room 83, Dominion Hotel. Good-by. Catch me, if you can.

"THE BIRD OF PARADISE."

"What is it?" asked a soft, anxious voice at his elbow.

Chick handed the note to the young woman. She read it, and then placed her hand to her heart. "This is awful!" she gasped. Then, with a quick change of expression, she added: "But it may be a trick. This terrible woman may have reasons for not desiring your presence in this room at this time."

"I have thought of that," replied Chick, with a sober face; "but, at the same time, she may have written the truth."

He pondered the matter a moment, and then said: "I shall not go to the Dominion Hotel on the representations of this message. There is a telephone down-stairs. There ought to be one in this room, but there isn't—and I'll go down and phone the Dominion."

"I will go with you. I don't care to stay behind. There's danger afloat. I am sure of it."

They went to the office, the phone was used, and the answer came back, after a few moments of waiting: "How did you know? Yes; there is a man in Room 83. He is an old man, and he has been stabbed, but there is life in him. Who are you?"

Chick answered this question, and then started, in a depressed mind, to leave the hotel.

"Miss Peyton," he said, as he halted at the sidewalk, "I shall not be gone long. The danger still exists. Here is Patsy. While I am away he will stay outside your room, so that he may prevent the entrance of an enemy. You may rely on Patsy."

These words said, Chick hurried away.

He found a cab at the corner, and directed the driver to make lightning time to the Dominion Hotel.

When about half-way, as the cab was turning a corner, Chick saw Nick Carter, as Doctor Pradius, step from the sidewalk and approach a waiting cab.

Chick, through the open window, gave a yell that made Nick throw back his head. At the same moment the overjoyed detective pulled the string for the driver to stop.

Nick Carter knew that something had gone wrong, when he stepped to the door of the cab and saw Chick's excited face.

The story was told in a few sentences. Nick took a seat beside his assistant, and the driver was instructed to make as good time returning as he had made in coming.

On the way Nick said: "If evidence were wanting to prove that I am fighting a devil, this last trick has furnished it. We may get there in time to prevent a murder, but I have my doubts. The affair has been too cunningly planned. The Bird was not talking through her hat when she asserted that to-night would end my quest. But there was one thing she did not know, and on her ignorance lies our hope of ultimate victory. But the murder! If only we can stop it."

The cab soon dashed into the court of the hotel.

Nick and Chick jumped out and fairly flew up the stairs to the floor upon which the room of Mildred Peyton was located.

As they reached the corridor upon which the door of the room faced Patsy came toward them.

When he saw Nick he gave a cry of joy.

The cry was succeeded by a scream of terror from within Miss Peyton's room.

Simultaneously, the three detectives made a dash for the door.

CHAPTER XI.

NICK CARTER SCORES.

Nick Carter and his two assistants had each witnessed many startling sights, but their nerves never received a ruder shock than when their eyes took in the awful spectacle which the room presented.

A door at the rear, connecting with an apartment not of the suite, was wide open, and lying across the threshold, her head fallen sidewise, with a gaping wound in the neck from which the blood flowed in a stream, was a woman with blond hair and slight figure. Her mouth, wide open, disclosed two teeth of gold.

A few feet from her, one hand clutching the door for

support, the other hanging by her side and gripping a blood-stained dagger, stood Mildred Peyton.

Her breath was coming in gasps, and her eyes were staring wildly.

At sight of the detectives she cast from her the dagger, and, dragging her trembling limbs to a chair, sat down and began to sob violently.

Nick Carter moved toward her, as if about to speak, but changed his mind and hastened to the dagger's victim. Tearing a strip from one of the bedsheets, he made a bandage and compress, and soon stopped the flow of blood. He felt of the pulse. There was a little life left.

As he rose to his feet he heard these words: "I have done an awful thing. I have killed a human being. But I had to. If I had not used the dagger she would have killed me. She said she was the Bird of Paradise, and that she had come to settle her account with Nick Carter's female detective."

Chick, who was bending over the speaker, asked quickly: "How did it happen, Miss Peyton?"

She was about to answer, when Nick Carter said: "I am as anxious to hear your story as Chick is, but before there is an explanation a pressing duty must be performed. Patsy, run down to the office and telephone to the chief of police and the coroner. Chick, take Miss Peyton into the parlor, and remain with her until I come to you."

"Why can't you come with us?" The voice was sweet and pleading.

"Because some one must remain here until the arrival of the city officials. I will keep you waiting but a short time."

"Is she really dead, Mr. Carter?"

"She is as good as dead. She will never do another evil act. To-night ends the career of the Bird of Paradise." He smiled grimly, as he continued: "I had counted on a different ending, but fate sometimes plays us strange tricks."

Chick and the young woman left the room and went to the parlor.

After they had taken seats in a corner, Chick said: "Nick may be absent some time. I am impatient to hear your terrible story. Tell it to me, and afterward you can tell it to Nick."

"I am willing," was the quick reply. "I want you to understand as soon as possible how frightfully perilous my situation was. I never suspected that danger lurked in the adjoining room. I had tried the door, and found it locked. I looked through the keyhole, to assure myself that the key was not on the other side of the door.

"I was sitting near it, expecting every moment your return, when the door suddenly opened and that awful woman rushed in. There was murder in her eyes. I was on my feet in a flash, and my hand went to my breast to grasp the handle of the dagger which I brought with me for protection. 'I am the Bird of Paradise!' the woman venomously hissed; 'and I have come to settle accounts with Nick Carter's female detective!' As the words left her mouth, she sprang toward me. Both arms were raised, and the fingers of each hand were bent. I think she intended to strangle me.

"I stood still. I did not tremble. At the moment my body was ice, my nerves like steel. As she reached forward to clutch me I acted. My hand flew from my breast, and—and——" the voice ceased, and the sobbing recommenced. It was some time before the tragic story was resumed.

"It was I who shrieked. As the Bird of Paradise fell, my coolness left me. I collapsed, physically and mentally. If you and Mr. Carter hadn't arrived when you did, I might have made away with myself. Conceive, if you can, the blinding horror of my position. I—I shall always see that ghastly sight!" She covered her eyes with her handkerchief, and said no more.

Presently Patsy appeared. Chick briefly told the story of the tragedy. "I have found out how the Bird got into the hotel and into that room next to Miss Peyton's," Patsy said. "She came up in the trunk that a transfer-wagon brought while I was on guard outside of Miss Peyton's door. Slick, wasn't it? Must have had complete arrangements made for the game to-night. Probably had the transfer-wagon waiting outside the Dominion Hotel while Nick was chewing the rag with her in an up-stairs room. Just as soon as Nick had gone from the room she probably slipped into the trunk, which was in the bedroom of the suite, and waited for the expressman, who must have been instructed to come for the trunk when he should see an old man with white whiskers come out of the elevator and come down the stairs. Or she may have phoned the expressman before jumping into the trunk. The room in the hotel was, of course, engaged beforehand. No wonder the Bird felt so sure she would fool Nick. He might have had a dozen de-

tectives on the watch, and the trunk scheme would probably have worked. There were nine chances to one in favor of it. The arrival of a trunk at a hotel is an almost hourly occurrence. Then, the room to which the trunk was taken is entered from a corridor that is at a right angle with the corridor upon which Miss Peyton's room faces. I saw the trunk go into the other corridor, and hadn't the ghost of a suspicion of the truth.

"Oh, there is another piece of news," announced Patsy. "Just before I came in here the office below was phoned that there was no stabbing done to-night in the Dominion Hotel. The alleged old man is a well-known character about town. The white whiskers were false, and the knife found sticking in his breast never reached the flesh. He tells a straight story, and the police believe him. He was hired to play the part. A woman—the Bird, of course—said she wanted to play a practical joke on a friend. She did not explain it. All she said was to instruct him in the rôle he was to play. He was in a room near-by while Nick and the Bird were having their heart-to-heart confab. His cue to enter upon the scene and do the stabbed-man act was the removal of a trunk from the Bird's room. Another slick play, but in spite of all her nicely laid plans the Bird fell in the soup."

The conversation was progressing when Nick Carter entered.

His assistants had never seen him look so sober.

But he spoke pleasantly:

"And how are you coming on, Miss Peyton?"

The answer was given with a sad smile. "I feel shaky, Mr. Carter, but my mind is more at ease."

"You were afraid not so very long ago that your assistance would not be very valuable. Aren't you ready to acknowledge that your fear was without foundation?"

"Yes. I was wrong. I have assisted you, but"—with a shudder—"at what a cost!"

Nick, sitting by her side, cast his eyes upon the floor. When he looked up he was smiling.

"The case has not turned exactly as I would have had it," he said, "and yet justice has been satisfied. The world is well rid of three dangerous criminals. Mrs. Bland could be well spared, Iora Crites was a menace to the peace of the community, and the crime-stained woman whose corpse lies in your room is better dead."

He remained silent for some moments.

Chick eyed him closely.

"Of what are you thinking, Nick?" he asked.

"I am thinking how different the life of the Bird of Paradise would have been if she had never left her country home. Hers is a wretched story. She was not driven by poverty into crime, but voluntarily embraced it. Heredity may be responsible for her criminal instincts. Isn't that your opinion, Miss Peyton?"

"Her brain must certainly have been diseased," was the reply.

Nick thought of the statement made by the Bird, in their talk at the Dominion Hotel.

"Yes," he said; "there may have been disease. She told me she had typhoid fever, and that she was not the same woman after her physical recovery. If she told the truth, she is more to be pitied than blamed. But I think she lied. Almost in the same breath she informed me that she had recovered her sanely intelligent poise. The two statements do not fit. If she had recovered, why did she plan the murderous scheme of to-night? Why did she tell me she was preparing to be a saint among her sex, and yet include murder in that preparation?"

"She may have become a criminal through disease, and afterward, when sane, have found it hard to shake off her criminal fetters," kindly suggested the young woman.

"Hardly. But let us change the subject. Let us talk of your future, Miss Peyton. Wilfred James will be here to-morrow."

"I know it."

"You cannot return with him."

"No," sadly. "I must stay here, I suppose, and give my testimony."

"It may not be necessary," returned Nick quietly.

"Not necessary?" regarding the great detective in surprise. "Why, I am the principal, the important witness, in the matter of the death of the Bird of Paradise."

Nick Carter's next words surprised her still more.

His voice had a deep, stern note in it.

"You will not be called as a witness," he replied, "because you will be called upon to enact the rôle of the principal!"

"What do you mean?" She was shaking like a leaf. The words came in a hoarse whisper.

"I mean," said Nick Carter, as he grasped her hands, "that the farce is at an end! I know all. I know you for what you are, thief and murderess! Your race is run, Mirabiel Thurber, Bird of Paradise!"

CHAPTER XII.

NICK'S WINNING CARD.

The woman who had posed as Mildred Peyton heard the words which revealed her hideous secret, and her face underwent a change that gave Chick the shudders. Gone was the expression of sweetness and candor. Gone every mark that had been fabricated to identify her with the noble Southern girl whose latest desire had been to assist the cause of justice. Her countenance, vivid in representation of utter defeat, was hellish in its deeper suggestion.

She submitted passively to the operation which secured her wrists, and her wonderful nerve returned when Nick Carter stepped back and surveyed her.

"I hate you, and I admire you!" she said, with a cold smile. "How did you do it?"

"By using my eyes, watching my chances, and taking advantage of your slips."

The Bird of Paradise bit her lip viciously. She said words unfit for polite ears.

Paying no attention to her coarse outburst, Nick Carter continued: "I suspected you from the first. When I went with Wilfred James to your room in Harlem, saw you, and listened to your voice, heard your report of what you had done, noted your eagerness to take up a work for which a woman of the station of which you represented yourself to be was wholly unfitted, of which education and environment should have given you a pronounced distaste, I began to suspect the truth. Thereafter I watched you closely."

"Fool—fool that I was!" the Bird exclaimed, in nervous rage; "to have given you a single chance! I should have killed you in New York!"

"The Florida scheme was one of your mistakes," said Nick. "When you submitted your Honoria Mullaly plan I was almost sure you were the Bird of Paradise. If I had had more evidence than I then possessed, I would never have allowed you to go upon the trip. I would have arrested you in New York. But, as my chain was far from complete, I allowed you to take the train. I believed the trip would give me what I lacked. There was danger, of course, in giving you rope, but there was also the prospect of clipping your wings. I made preparations to checkmate any murderous game you might elect to play. But I could not see into every corner of your dark mind, and so I never imagined that you intended to kill Iora Crites, as well as myself."

The Bird of Paradise, listening to the great detective's exposition with absorbing interest, now amazement, now chagrin, showing in her face, here broke in:

"I never liked Iora Crites. If I could have done so, I would have made her believe she had as a maid a genuine Irish girl, and not myself. I did fool her up to a certain point. She did not spot my disguise until we were half through our conversation at the Battery." After a moment's pause, she asked: "Didn't it surprise you to find that I, too, had taken poison?"

A smile slowly overspread the detective's countenance.

"If you had taken any poison I might have been surprised. But one look was sufficient to convince me that you were shamming. You come perilously close to being an expert at malingering, but the convulsive play was slightly overdone. You had smeared your lips with the poisoned orange juice, and you had taken an emetic. It was slow in its action, and so I was compelled to assist it."

The Bird, affected by an unpleasant memory, first frowned and then laughed.

"Ah," she remarked, with a shake of her head, "just one thing defeated my plans. If you had not suspected Mildred Peyton, everything would have turned out well for me. If I had had the remotest idea that you held the key to my secret, I would never have solicited the interview in the Dominion Hotel."

"But you did not know," returned Nick Carter, "and therefore I went to the appointment with a shrewd idea of your plot. I believed that murder was contemplated, but I was not to be the victim. You had put out of the way two of your intimates. There was but one left, the best actress of them all, 'Smooth Sal,' who, ten years ago, was the pride of the riverside underworld. She must go, and with a hellish heartlessness and a monstrous ingratitude that stamp you as a moral monster in a class by yourself, you planned first to use her in an extremely delicate and vitally important play, and then reward her by taking her life."

"You are more than a match for the devil!" the beautiful fiend ejaculated. "Played with me to the last, and I never suspected."

"Yes; I played with you," the stern voice went on, "but not so well as I wished. I hoped to prevent the murder of 'Smooth Sal,' but you were too cunning for

me there. I had figured it out that you would come to the Dominion Hotel to show yourself to me as the Bird in order that I might afterward be able to identify you, and that 'Smooth Sal' would be in your room to amuse Chick in her new but well-drilled rôle of Honoria Mulaly, otherwise the disguised Southern beauty, Mildred Peyton. Chick had never seen the Miss Peyton of your repertoire, and would, therefore, never suspect that he was talking with the understudy, and not the original fabricator."

Patsy's eyes grew unnaturally large.

"Holy smoke!" said he. "Do you mean to say, Mr. Carter, that Chick passed the evening with 'Smooth Sal'?"

"Yes. The Bird of Paradise is a magnificent actress, and 'Smooth Sal' was a close second. They had probably thoroughly rehearsed the parts they were to play in the night's program. The Bird, an artist in make-up, appeared before me in the room in the Dominion Hotel bearing no resemblance to the woman who had called herself Mildred Peyton. Her disguise was carried to the point of emphasizing and debasing the physical peculiarities of her real self. But it was not long before I saw through the mask. As Miss Peyton, the Bird had the habit of unconsciously patting the hair on the side of her head. These movements were generally made at moments of nervousness. I have seen many women with this habit, but I never saw one who had the same motion, the same bend of the head, that the Bird of Paradise has."

The great detective paused, and smiled broadly. The discomfited Bird was patting her hair. Becoming aware of the action, she scowled and lowered her eyes.

"Oh, if I had been a man," she hissed, "I would not be here now!" Then she added impatiently: "Are you through with your talk? There is nothing more to tell, is there? Why not leave something to the imagination?"

"There are only a few details to touch upon," replied Nick Carter smoothly. "You may not care to hear them, but Chick and Patsy will not prove unwilling listeners. Of course, it is the plain inference that after passing through the Pullman and giving Chick a meaning look, you thought you were exchanging glances of understanding with Nick Carter, you know—went into the day coach, where your confederate, 'Smooth Sal,' was sitting with her bag of oranges. You spoke to her."

"I didn't," the Bird snappishly interrupted. "I dropped a note in her lap."

"It amounts to the same thing. She, as the boy, received her instructions, and acted when the proper station was reached. And of course your cue to use the dagger, and forever shut the mouth of the only confederate who was in your confidence, was my appearance in the corridor. You heard Patsy's exclamation, and you acted. There had been ample time for a change of parts. Chick was sent to the Dominion Hotel to gaze upon what he had reason to believe would be my dead body, and while he was away you and 'Smooth Sal' changed clothes and facial make-ups. You made an artistic job of Sal's face. She owned the gold teeth, and you, in making up for your interview with me, imitated the dental effect. Your plot was cunningly laid. The dead woman would be buried in Richmond, the official inquiry would take place here, and with me as a victim of your Mildred Peyton device, there would be little likelihood that the slain woman would be recognized as other than the notorious Bird of Paradise."

"And then what?" The wicked woman had again become interested in the detective's story.

"Then, with your bridges burned, you intended to marry Wilfred James, and shine as a member of that society which you had plundered, and of whose laws you had hitherto had a supreme contempt. Whether you had the further intention of so shaping your conduct that the property rights of others should be respected is a matter that need not be discussed. The end has come."

There was silence for some moments. The Bird's head had been bowed. Suddenly she raised it. There was a look of defiance in her eyes.

"Do you realize," she said, "that in spite of all you have said, of all you have learned and imagined, that you have not a strong case against me? I'll hire a smart lawyer, and he'll riddle the prosecution."

This utterance brought a smile that was half of pity, half of contempt, to the face of Nick Carter.

"I have not shown all my hand," he quietly replied. "But I see no harm in doing so. 'Smooth Sal' lived fifteen minutes. There is a notary in the building, and he was by the dying woman's side before five of the fifteen minutes had elapsed. She made a confession. It is sufficient, taken in connection with what I know, to make absolutely certain your conviction of the crime of murder."

The Bird of Paradise uttered a groan of despair. Her face was ghastly. The last straw had floated away from her.

She was taken to the city prison, and in due time was tried for her life.

As she had abundant resources, lawyers were found who made the most of a desperate case.

The plea of insanity was dexterously and ably urged. Witnesses from New York were brought to support this line of defense. The typhoid story was shown to be true. No one, however, could swear that Mirabird Thurber, after the fever left her, was in a mentally unbalanced condition. There was only the defendant's word for that.

But she was a cunning witness for herself. Her beauty had its effect. The plea for life which she made brought tears to the eyes of the jurymen. Though they could not completely accept the theory of the defense, yet they admitted that there was a doubt. This doubt, in accordance with the court's instructions, they resolved in favor of the fair defendant, and she was found guilty of murder in the second degree.

The sentence was imprisonment for life.

Returning to New York, Nick Carter and his assistants resumed an inquiry that had been commenced before the Southern trip was undertaken.

It had reference to the identity of the woman who was drowned in the Harlem River.

After a month's work the whole truth was laid bare.

The dead woman was the real Mildred Peyton.

She had come to New York after the death of her father to seek employment. Timid and reserved by nature, she met with no success, and when her last dime had been spent for food she became desperate. She stole a loaf of bread from a baker's display. Arrested, she gave a fictitious name, and was sent to the Island for three months. There she met Iora Crites. The woman old in crime corrupted the novice. When they came out Mildred Peyton accepted the protection of Miss Crites.

A year after the release from confinement of the Southern girl she was stricken with a fatal illness. At the time the Bird of Paradise was preparing to move in checkmate of the designs of the Merchants' Committee. The illness of Mildred Peyton, the strange likeness between them, and the fact that the sick girl was living under an assumed name, gave her an idea. How it was carried out is known by the reader.

Nick Carter received the large fee promised by the Merchants' Committee. He made a fair division with Chick and Patsy.

Wilfred James reached Richmond to learn that he had escaped a terrible danger. His fondest hopes were crushed, and what he suffered added ten years to his appearance.

When the reaction came, and he was able to think calmly, he went to Nick Carter, and, with a voice broken with emotion, said: "I owe you more than my life. Look upon me as your friend forever."

THE END.

The next issue of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 490, will contain "Three Lives in Peril; or, Nick Carter's Busiest Night." Ready next week.

About the Early Numbers of

Tip Top Weekly

We receive hundreds of letters every week from readers asking if we can supply the early numbers of Tip Top containing Frank's adventures. In every case we are obliged to reply that numbers 1 to 300 are entirely out of print.

We would like to call the attention of our readers to the fact that the Frank Merriwell Stories now being published in book form in the Medal Library are inclusive of these early numbers. The first book to appear was No. 180 entitled "Frank Merriwell's Schooldays."

We give herewith a complete list of all the stories that have been published in book form up to the time of writing. We will be glad to send a fine colored cover catalogue of the Medal Library which is just filled with good things for boys, upon receipt of a one-cent stamp to cover postage.

The Price of The Merriwell Books is Ten Cents per Copy. At all Newsdealers

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Frank Merriwell Down South.	Medal No. 190.	10c.
Frank Merriwell in Camp.	Medal No. 228.	10c.
Frank Merriwell in England.	Medal No. 240.	10c.
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Frank Merriwell's Athletes.	Medal No. 292.	10c.
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Frank Merriwell's Book of Physical Development. Diamond Hand-Book	No. 6.	10c.
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